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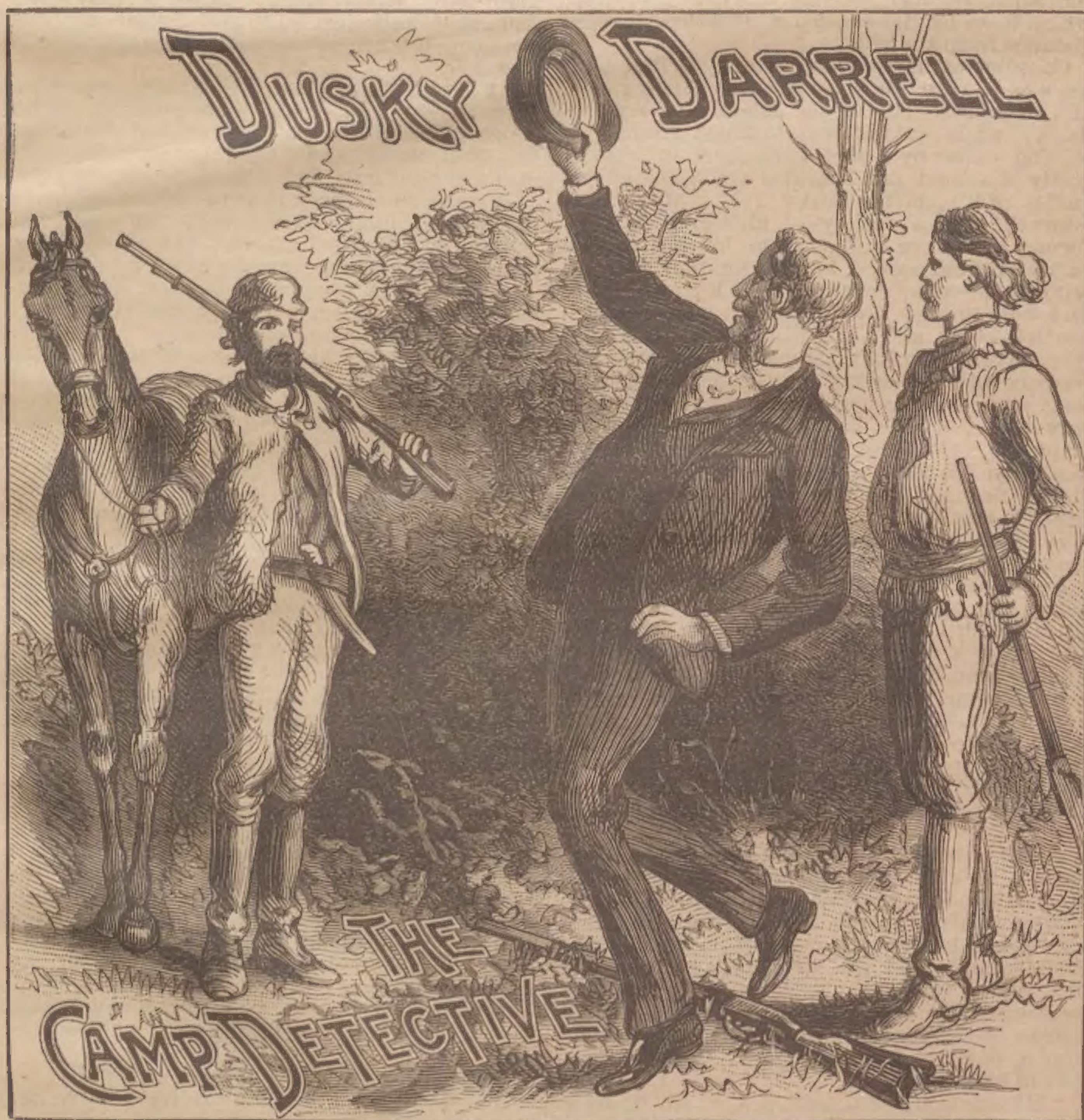
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"WHOO! WHOO! HURRAH! I HOPE I MAY BE KNOCKED TO THE OTHER SIDE OF
CHRISTMAS IF IT ISN'T DUSKY DARRELL!"

Dusky Darrell,

THE CAMP DETECTIVE;

OR,

The Dandy's Daring Dash.

BY EDWIN EMERSON.

CHAPTER I.

TRAILING A SHADOW.

ONE bright afternoon in August, a number of years ago, a man, looking quite lonely and discontented, strolled leisurely down to the river, which flows by Independence, Missouri, at some distance from the village.

Considering the place in which we find him, he was a man of extraordinary appearance. His dress was cut in the latest city style; a dainty white cravat was fastened around his shining collar by a neat little bow in front, a costly diamond pin sparkled amid the snowy ruffles of his shirt, a heavy gold watch-chain, adorned with a variety of glittering charms, formed a concave bridge from his button-hole to his left vest-pocket; and, in singular contrast with all these, he carried a rifle, a powder-flask and bullet-pouch, two knives in a belt underneath his coat, and a brace of pistols. His chin was shaven clean, but his cheeks and upper lip were covered by silky, light-colored whiskers, long and flowing, which he was constantly caressing when his hands were not otherwise employed. Gold-rimmed eye-glasses sat majestically on his nose, and the long, slender blue ribbon fastened to them swept gracefully back over his shoulder.

In short, he was a dandy in appearance, and his name is Adolphus Perkins.

Notwithstanding his appearance, which suggested the opinion that he had never ventured so far west, he handled his rifle so naturally, and at times carried himself in such a hunter-like manner, that the first opinion was in danger of being shaken. Indeed, after spending over six months in the vast wilderness lying north of the Black Hills, with one of the most famous trappers west of the Mississippi, it is not strange that he should feel and act as though he were somewhat accustomed to wild life.

As we have said, he strolled down to the river, with a look of loneliness and dissatisfaction. His left hand alternately toyed with his watch-chain and his whiskers, nervously and mechanically, as if he were not aware of its wanderings. As he approached the stream, there was only one person in sight. This was a young man walking slowly up and down the bank, leading a horse. Adolphus Perkins merely bestowed on him a passing glance, paying no further attention to him.

"Hangnation!" he muttered, in no pleasant voice. "It's just my luck. I wonder if anybody ever knew me to have any better? If so, they would do me a favor by jogging my mem-

ory, so that I could find some consolation in the recollection. Here I've landed in Independence, with the intention of making a journey across the plains, and, with my usual luck, I have arrived just in time to be too late. The last wagon-train left one week ago, (I'll be hanged if I didn't stop in St. Louis exactly that length of time,) and there is no telling when another will start."

He paused, sat down under a tree, and took off his hat. Laying his gun across his lap, and resting the crown of his head against the tree, he sat there for a long time in the cool shade, looking up at the blue sky and the few white clouds that flecked its illimitable disk. He had evidently fallen into a brown study, and the young man, whom we have mentioned as leading a horse backward and forward along the river-bank, cast frequent glances in that direction, as if half decided to go forward and form the acquaintance of the extravagantly dressed stranger.

At length the exquisite brought his eyes down from the sky, and changed his position. With a prodigious yawn he looked lazily about him, and then, thrusting his hand into an inside pocket, he hesitatingly brought something to light.

It was a small black picture-case, handsomely carved and inlaid with pearls. He opened it, with quite a changed expression of countenance, and looked long and earnestly at the miniature it contained. He became so absorbed in this pastime, that he seemed closely studying every feature of the person represented.

"By Jove! I'd like to know who she is," he said to himself. "With the single exception of Myrtle Forrest, I think I never saw as pretty a face. I'd give dollars to know who she is and where she resides. Demme! I believe I should call on her, without so much as asking leave. Can't be that she lives in these parts. Lost by one of the last emigrants that were here, I suppose. If I should see her to-day, I know I should wake up in the morning and find myself over head and ears in love. Like as not I'll find myself in that condition, without seeing her, if I look at her picture much longer."

Adolphus Perkins was no poor judge of beauty. The likeness he admired so deeply was that of a beautiful, girlish face, possessing attractions of an indescribable nature. It was one of those strangely interesting faces, which invariably claim something more than a passing glance, and which make one feel as though he could look at it forever without tiring. The hair was dark and unadorned, pushed straight back from the classic brow, and falling in a shower of beautiful curls to the shoulders. The face was oval; the eyes large and soulful in their expression; the mouth rosy and deliciously tempting; and about the faultless lips played a smile that showed their owner was not entirely averse to mischief.

Adolphus was about to return the picture to his pocket, when a voice intruded on his solitude.

"Hallo, sir! What's that you've got?"

He started out of his pleasant day-dream, and looked hastily around to see who had spoken.

The young man leading the horse was coming toward him.

"I beg your pardon; did you speak to me?" he inquired, coolly regarding the stranger through his eye-glasses.

"I did, sir," answered the man respectfully. "I saw you looking at something. I should like to know what it was?"

"Indeed! What is that to you?"

"Well, my friend, if that something was a miniature, and you found it in this vicinity, it's a great deal to me."

"Oh—ah—indeed!" stammered Adolphus.

His countenance fell instantly, and he stared at the stranger with a look of jealousy. This, then, was the rightful owner of the picture he had found, and, as a matter of course, was the accepted lover of the original! He was not at all an ill-looking fellow, either. He possessed a fine, open countenance, an honest, truthful, fearless eye, and (worst of all) what the ladies might term a killing mustache. Another attraction of his pleasant, manly face, was the look of indomitable cheerfulness it wore—a cheerfulness that often rose to playfulness, but never sunk to despondency. Adolphus regarded him narrowly for a while, and then, after some hesitation, said:

"Suppose I didn't find the picture?"

"Then, sir, I have only to bid you good-day, begging your pardon for my seeming impertinence."

He said it in an open, honest way, and, with a pleasant smile and bow, he turned to leave the spot.

"Hold on," said Adolphus, whose sense of honor would not permit him to let the deception remain unaltered. "Hold on. This picture isn't mine. If it's yours, take it. I picked it up near this spot this morning. I suppose it's yours."

The stranger took the case with thanks, and opened it to make sure that there was no mistake. He immediately said it was the one he had lost, and thanked the finder again.

"I have been looking for it for more than an hour," he said. "To any one else it could scarcely be esteemed an article of value, but I should have been very sorry indeed to leave this place without recovering it." And he put it in his pocket.

"Just my luck!" growled Perkins. "I'd like mighty well to have kept that reflection, but if you love her and she loves you—why, that's an end of it, and I may as well consider my goose cooked."

The stranger was obviously surprised.

"I fail to comprehend," he said. "You appear interested in this picture. Pardon me, but it can hardly be possible that the original is an acquaintance of yours."

"Good gracious, no! I never saw her in my life, but I'll be hanged if I wouldn't like to! I'll tell you what, my friend," exclaimed Perkins, rising to his feet and laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, "I don't mind telling you, because you are in a condition to sympathize with me. The fact is, I'm—ahem!—*I'm struck!* That is to say, I—I have almost fallen in love with this damsel, merely by looking at her picture. By Jove! the angels cannot have prettier faces than the one that picture represents, and, whoever you are, I consider you any-

thing but a gentleman to steal her heart when my back was turned."

"You talk in riddles," returned the other smiling.

"Of course I do," was the muttered rejoinder. "Deuce take me! I never talk in any other way. But never mind. I say, sir, this young lady must think the world of you? I can tell by her looks that she is capable of a deep, sincere and everlasting love."

"I should be extremely sorry if she did not think a great deal of me. She is my sister."

"Your sister!"

"Certainly."

"Oh, Lord! You don't tell me so!"

Adolphus leaned against the tree, completely out of breath, and stared open-mouthed at the stranger. Only his sister! That put a new phase on affairs. Recovering himself, and feeling that an apology was expected of him, Adolphus cleared his throat, and confusedly stammered:

"Forgive me, old fellow. I didn't know—that is, I—you—I mean, I had no idea I was talking about your sister. Confound it! I hope you are not offended?"

"Not at all," laughed the stranger, "not at all. You have said nothing that even my sister could be offended at; then why should I? On the contrary, I have taken quite a liking to you in the few minutes we have been conversing, and I am willing that we should be friends, if you are not of a different inclination."

"Give me your hand, old buck; give me your hand. You're a trump, you are. What's your name?"

"Jack Weller."

"From where?"

"Cincinnati."

"And I am Adolphus Perkins, from Boston, at your service."

They shook each other heartily by the hand.

"Take a cigar," said Adolphus, producing a well-filled case of fragrant Havanas. He was in an excellent humor.

Each took one, and began to smoke. Then Adolphus ventured to ask what had brought his companion to that part of the country.

"Gold fever," was the reply. "Not that I have got it, but my father was lured from home by visions of wealth."

"No! Where is your father?"

"He is with the emigrants that left here one week ago. He and my mother, and my sister—"

"Your sister?"

"Of course."

"Is *she* crossing the plains?"

"To be sure. Why not?"

"Why, yes, indeed—why not? Perfectly natural, of course. Pray excuse me—ahem! So *she* is going to the gold regions with your father? Just so. By the way, what is her name, if I may ask?"

"Julia."

"Julia? Exactly. Just so. I tell you, Weller, I admire her style of beauty. And so she is going to California? Just so. Exactly. But, my dear fellow, your presence here still remains unexplained. It seems you did not go to California with the rest of the family."

"No; but I intend to. I was left behind to

settle up father's business, which required a greater time than had been expected. I was to join them at Independence, but did not arrive until yesterday, and then I learned that they were gone. They left a letter, however, telling me to wait until another caravan should start."

"Blamed if you ain't in the same predicament I am," exclaimed Adolphus, slapping his thigh. "I guess we'll have to wait together. Companions in misery, ain't we, Weller?"

"Are you on your way across the continent?"

"Ain't I, though? Why, bless you, I left the Atlantic Coast with the determination to stop only when the Pacific Coast was reached. Unless, indeed," he added, to himself, "I should be fortunate enough to find a wife between those two points."

"But we cannot tell when another party of emigrants will start," said Jack Weller. "From the looks of things at present, a caravan will not leave this place for some time to come, and I've been thinking about it till I've decided not to wait."

"Not wait? What, then, do you intend doing?"

"You see that horse standing there? To-morrow morning, at an early hour, I shall mount him, and turn his head toward the setting sun. I'll put him forward at good speed, and shall overtake my parents long before they reach the Rocky Mountains."

"Decided to pursue 'em, eh?"

"I have. I presume you are not without a horse, Perkins?"

"Got as good a one as ever bore saddle."

"Then, since we have the same destination in view, perhaps you will bear me company to-morrow?"

Our hero's eyes opened very wide at this.

"My stars!" he exclaimed, scratching his head; "it will be an awful dangerous journey to undertake by ourselves. If a band of murdering red-skins should surround us, what could we do?"

"I have taken all that into consideration," said the young man, coolly, "and am not in the least afraid."

"Oh, neither am I—neither am I," Adolphus hastened to say. "I didn't mention the fact because of fear, but because I thought you had not borne in mind what a helpless and hopeless condition such an event would place us in. I am a stranger to fear, and always have been. I was among the Indians two years ago, and killed several; butchered a grizzly bear on the Yellowstone, and slaughtered a whole pack of wolves. I am not afraid—oh, no!"

"Then you will go with me?"

"Of course, if you wish it."

Perhaps Adolphus, even then, would have found some excuse for remaining behind, but for the beautiful face that rose before his mental vision, and the reflection that sweet Julia Weller was with the party his friend wished him to join. Here was an opportunity to see the lady whose picture he had found, and to form her acquaintance. This thought drowned the remembrance of the risk incurred in the undertaking, and he was eager to be off.

So it was decided that they should commence the journey alone on the morrow.

They sat there in pleasant conversation, taking no note of time, until the sun went down, when Jack Weller again took charge of his horse, which had been grazing near by, and the two men slowly returned to their lodgings.

CHAPTER II.

IN PURSUIT OF THE WAGON-TRAIN.

ON the following morning, just as the sun rose, two horsemen galloped out of Independence, evidently equipped for a journey, with their faces turned resolutely westward. They were Adolphus Perkins and his new friend, Jack Weller. They were looking fresh and full of vigor, after a night of comfortable rest, and, both being armed to the teeth, they seemed ready to meet their savage foes on hostile grounds. Adolphus frequently found occasion to remark on the probability of their being assassinated by the "deuced red-skins," but his friend cheered him by recalling him to the remembrance that the emigrants were only a week out, that they could be no great distance away, and that it would be almost a wonder if wild Indians should come so near the settlements as to intercept them before they could reach the caravan. With this fact in view, they traveled with comparative leisure.

That night they procured rest and shelter in a lonely cabin, where lived an old hunter and his family. When morning broke, they were in their saddles and on their way, making the best of the cooler part of the day. Civilization thinned rapidly as they advanced, and that night they slept in the open air, with nothing but their blankets to protect them from the falling dew. Adolphus was more accustomed to this than his friend—although, judging from appearances, one could not help thinking differently—and consequently took to it more naturally than Weller.

They were favored with fine weather, although, on the third day out, a thunder-shower, of two hours' duration, relieved the monotony of the sunshine, and purified the atmosphere to a degree that rendered traveling much pleasanter for the time. On this same afternoon they met a party of hunters coming in from the mountains, well laden with spoils. On making inquiries they learned that this party had met the wagon-train, and that the latter was making rapid headway under the piloting of its guide. One of the hunters then went on to say that they had nooned with the emigrants, and that while they were discussing their dinner a single horseman had hove in sight on the western horizon, and came galloping toward them.

"We all thought," said the loquacious fellow, "that the beaver war goin' to j'ine us in our meal, but, shoot me if he didn't stop 'bout half a mile away, and set stock-still in his saddle, starin' at the encampment fur several minutes. Then he tained to the left, struck his horse into a dead run, and made a complete circle round the camp, wavin' his arms in the air like a blamed lunatic. Arter that he cantered off, appearently satisfied, and he didn't show his mug ag'in while we's thar."

The story of the talkative hunter was scarcely heeded, and consequently made little or no impression on the minds of those to whom it was

related. Perhaps neither Perkins nor Weller would ever have thought of the circumstance afterward, had they not been repeatedly reminded of it by repetitions of the circumstance itself—and reminded of it in a manner that prohibited every possibility of their ever forgetting it again while they lived.

From the first they had followed the well-beaten trail made by traders and emigrants, and each day the track of the caravan ahead of them grew fresher, as it were, encouraging them in their effort to reach it before entering the dangerous country.

But to dwell on every particular of the long and tedious chase, would be to try the reader's patience unnecessarily.

On the sixth day of their journey it became evident that the party they were pursuing could not be more than twenty-four hours in advance. Toward noon Jack Weller brought down an antelope with his rifle, and was considerably elated in consequence thereof. The choicest portions of the animal were secured for the mid-day meal; the horses were picketed, a fire was kindled, and the meat was speedily skewered, properly roasted and forthwith devoured. It was a beautiful day—such a day as brings to a healthy constitution a knowledge that there are times when simple existence is enjoyment. Heaven and earth seemed permeated with what we will venture to term silent music, soothing the soul into a delightful serenity, elevating the spirits, and seeming to lift up mortality into an atmosphere of divine purity.

When they had finished their dinner our travelers did not mount and away at once, but lingered on the spot long enough to smoke a cigar apiece, generously furnished by Adolphus. Our hero, not forgetting a lesson learned in a former Western tour, had bethought him to lay in a bountiful supply of the companionable weed on the present occasion before leaving home. For a time they conversed desultorily, as they reclined languidly on the grass, but they soon relapsed into listless silence, and puffed away unconscious of each other's presence. The delightful temperature, and the sweet, inaudible music that filled the air, awakened an answering vibration in their souls, and infused in them such a feeling of calm, delicious rest, that they grew more and more unwilling to move or speak.

Before they could acquire energy enough to arouse themselves from their inertia, their pleasant dreams were interrupted, and their activity restored in a manner quite unexpected. All at once a deep, gruff voice exclaimed:

"Sleep on, strangers! It's a free country!"

This not only broke the spell that bound them, but caused them to start to their feet and seize their guns.

When this they had done, the sight that met their eyes, and the loud, hearty laugh that greeted their ears, made them pause and stare in wonder and confusion. There, within ten paces of them stood a man, coolly regarding the youthful twain with his small, twinkling eyes, holding in one hand a rifle as long as himself, while the other grasped the bridle-rein of a horse—a large, powerful animal of a jet-black color. The man's appearance proclaimed him a

hunter and trapper—one whose chosen home was the wildest solitude of the American continent—whose chosen pastime was contention with the Indians—who had reveled in dangers for years, and feared nothing mortal. He was neither short nor tall, but of medium height, wiry, well developed, a splendid type of physical beauty. His dress consisted entirely of skins, fitting his limbs tightly, and showing the play of his muscles to good advantage. His face was expressive and pleasant, though rugged, sunburnt and partially covered with beard. In short, he was a character in whom an honest man would have recognized a faithful friend, but who was no less ardent as an enemy to any who called forth his hatred. The young men were abashed as well as surprised to think he had come so near without their knowledge, and leading a horse at that.

But with Adolphus it was soon over. His surprise suddenly changed to blank amazement. His mouth flew open, his eyes dilated, his fingers expanded, his gun fell unheeded to the ground, as he started back with an exclamation of mingled import. Then, snatching off his hat, he flung it into the air in an ecstasy of delight, and shouted vociferously:

"Whoop! whoop! hurrah! whoop! It's Dusky Darrell! It's Dusky Darrell! Hurrah! I hope I may be knocked to the other side of Christmas if it isn't Dusky Darrell!"

Evidently astonished by these singular demonstrations, the trapper ceased laughing, and looked searchingly at the author of them. Instantly a gleam of recognition overspread his countenance, and he came forward, with his hand extended, leaving the black horse at liberty. His large, brown hand grasped the more delicate one of his former friend, which he shook long and heartily, without uttering a word, his face alone revealing the pleasure afforded him by this meeting.

At length he stepped back, folded his hands over the muzzle of his rifle, and surveyed the young man from head to foot. Then, in his deep, rumbling voice, he said:

"Wal, Spider, I never 'spected to see you in these parts ag'in; blowed if I did!"

Adolphus laughed gleefully.

"And I'm powerful glad to see you," added the trapper.

Adolphus slapped his thigh and stamped his foot.

"Thunderation!" he cried, "I *do* have a streak of luck at long intervals, and this is one of 'em. I would have given dollars for the privilege of meeting you on this tour of mine, and here you have turned up when such an event was least expected. Oh, Lord! give me your hand again, Darrell. This is my friend, Jack Weller, an excellent fellow, whom I fell in with an Independence. You see this man, Jack? His name is Dusky Darrell, and there isn't a braver man this side of the Mississippi. You have heard me remark that this is not the first time I have been on the prairies? Well, there stands the man who was with me in my first experience of Western life."

Jack had been at a loss to understand what it all meant, until thus enlightened by his friend.

"Wal, Spider, I'm blowed if I ever 'spected to see that face of yours in these parts ag'in," repeated the trapper.

"You might have expected it," declared Adolphus. "I told you when we parted, that I should be out here again before long."

"Wagh! I know yer said it, but I 'lowed 'twar all moonshine."

"You didn't think I'd be as good as my word?"

"No."

"Why?"

The trapper's eyes twinkled roguishly as he replied:

"I'll tell yer why. You used to sw'ar a dozen times a day that of you war' lucky enough to git back to the States with yer skulp, you'd never leave 'em ag'in if you lived a thousand years."

"Pooh! that was when I was out of humor."

"It was when you thought of gittin' a crack on the head from some pesky Blackfoot's tomahawk," corrected the other.

"Demnition! what do you mean?" snapped Perkins, turning very red, and glancing at Weller as if to discover whether he had understood the hunter's remark or not.

Dusky Darrell clapped his hands on his sides and gave vent to a laugh which, though it elicited no noise, shook his entire frame. Perkins turned redder than before, but made a feeble attempt to smile.

"See yer", Spider," said Darrell, when his mirth had subsided; "reckon you hain't forgot that you used to be afeard of Injuns!"

"Me afraid!" Adolphus became the very picture of injured innocence. Then, with a smile, he turned to Jack Weller and said: "Of course you will place no weight to my friend's words. He has always declared (in jest, of course) that I am afraid of Indians, though I have never given him the least cause to think so. Now, old fellow," turning to the trapper again, "if you don't cease rallying me, I shall not tell you the news from St. Louis."

It was plain that Adolphus was not a little annoyed by what his eccentric friend had said, but he could not have hit upon a better mode of changing the subject, than that which he adopted. He had no sooner mentioned news from St. Louis, than the trapper's face became grave and eager, and he spoke much more quickly that he was in the habit of speaking. A long and earnest conversation ensued between Adolphus and the old trapper.

On discovering that the conversation concerned none but the participators therein, Jack Weller graciously withdrew, and employed himself in rubbing his horse's limbs, overturning the contents of his pack for examination, etc.

When past events were reviewed to the satisfaction of both parties, Dusky Darrell came abruptly down to the present.

"Come, Spider," said he: "you hain't told me yet what brung you to the prairies on this 'casion. Not gold, I take it—nor yet a burnin' fur adventure. When we parted at Independence, I remember hearin' you say as how you mought be expected 'long in this d'rection ag'in 'fore many years, but, now I come to think on't, I b'lieve you said it war'

to be a weddin'-tower. Whar's yer squaw, Spider?"

Adolphus coughed, and looked confused.

"I have none," he replied.

"'Tain't a weddin'-tower, then?"

"No. I am now traversing the West in search of a wife!"

Darrell bent forward, and looked keenly at Adolphus, as if inclined to doubt his sincerity. Then he threw his head back and broke into another silent but hearty laugh, to the intense annoyance and confusion of its object.

"Spider, I've allus said you war' the most cur'us chap I ever run afoul of, and smash me if I take it back now. In s'arch of a wife! Ain't thar more feminines on t'other side of the Missis-sipp than thar is out hyur?"

"That is neither here nor there," said Adolphus, loftily. "I am now on the trail of one of the prettiest damsels it ever fell to my lot to see."

"Are, hey?"

"Indeed I am. She is Jack Weller's sister."

Whereupon he told the trapper all about the picture he had found at Independence, and how the owner claimed his property. He expatiated considerably on the exquisite beauty of the copy, and he remarked that it must be beyond the power of the strongest imagination to conceive of the divine loveliness of the original. The trapper heard him through, with an expression which it would be difficult to describe illumining his visage, and when the story ended he appeared on the eve of exploding into another fit of laughter. Instead of giving vent to his amusement, however, he simply inquired:

"Whar is the gal, at present writin'?"

"She and the rest of the family (except Jack there) are with an emigrant party on their way to California. We started with the intention of overtaking them. We judge from the trail that we will be able to join them to-morrow."

Darrell looked at the trail, and informed him that he was right. By brisk riding they would assuredly be able to overtake the emigrants on the next day.

"Can't you go along with us, old fellow?" asked Adolphus.

The trapper smiled.

"S'pose you think I've nothin' to do but tramp 'round after you," he said, good-naturedly.

"Don't think any thing of the kind," protested the other, "but your time doesn't seem occupied at present, unless you are on your way to the trapping-grounds. The fact is, demmit, I don't relish the idea of parting so soon."

Darrell relapsed into silence, and looked away toward the southern horizon with that steady, vacant stare which shows the mind to be utterly wrapped up in itself. At length he came out of his reverie, and said, quietly:

"Wal, Spider, now as we've come together after a long sep'ration, I allow thar's no need bein' in a hurry to turn our backs on each other. I'm goin' to trap a spell in the Rocky Mountains this season, and I reckon I won't be goin' much out of my course if I rides with you till yer overtakes the wagons."

"Then you will accompany us?"

"That's what I've been sayin'."

"Good! A man doesn't feel so confounded uncomfortable riding across the prairies, when there's a man of experience in the party."

Jack Weller joined them in time to hear these last remarks, and expressed himself highly gratified by the trapper's decision to accompany them.

"But," said he, exhibiting a little impatience, "if we lose more time, I fear we shall not overtake our party to-morrow."

"This beaver war 'bout to make the same s'gestion," said the trapper, glancing at the sun. "We kin make sev'ral miles yet afore sundown, if we git off 'thout losin' more time."

In less than three minutes after this, they were all in their saddles, cantering briskly westward. The sun was three hours high when they started, and they made good use of the time granted them before it set. When night came on they turned aside from the trail and camped in a cottonwood grove. After discussing their supper, they sat around the cheerful fire smoking, Dusky Darrell whiling away the time by reciting thrilling reminiscences of his adventurous career, for the amusement of his companions.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER.

NEXT morning they were up bright and early, and were delighted to find the weather most auspicious for the continuation of their journey. Preparations were hastily made, and when the sun's first rays shot athwart the sky their animals were between their knees, moving at a brisk but gentle canter along the prairie trail.

The company of Dusky Darrell proved a great pleasure to the young adventurers; scarcely less so to Weller, who had never met him before, than to Adolphus himself. He was somewhat eccentric, to be sure, as men of his class generally are, but beneath his eccentricities beat a heart honest and unchangeable, ever true to a friend, but exceedingly bitter toward an enemy. Flashes of humor frequently broke through his grave exterior, and, from sundry hits at Adolphus from time to time, it became apparent that our hero had, from some cause or other, once been the principal 'scape-valve for these flashes of humor.

Darrell said he had recently learned of a place in the Rocky Mountains abounding with beaver and otter, and it was for this place he was bound at the present time.

"It's more'n two hundred mile north of the p'int whar this trail strikes the mountains," he added, "and this route ain't my nearest one by a long shot. If I git thar at the time I want to git thar, I'll have to leave you when we reach the wagon-train, and strike off in another d'rection."

They kept their horses at a rapid and steady gallop all the forenoon, and mile after mile was measured off by the pounding hoofs of the animals.

Just at noon, as they drew rein for the purpose of roasting a prairie chicken, which had been killed for dinner, the trapper surprised his companions by raising his hand, and pointing straight ahead.

"Look yonder," he said.

They looked in the direction designated, but saw nothing.

"Yer doesn't look fur 'nough away," added the trapper.

They saw it now. With careful looking, the object—or objects—alluded to became visible to them. At this time the level prairie was on every side of them, as far as the eye could reach, and not so much as a single tree was visible in any direction. Directly over their horses' heads—a number of small white spots were seen. At first they appeared stationary, but a more careful scrutiny showed them to be in motion, and slowly ascending a swell in the prairie.

"What are they?" inquired Adolphus.

"That's yer caravan," was the reply.

"Good!" exclaimed Weller; "this is better than I expected. Two more hours' ride, and we shall be with them."

"That's jist whar you're wrong, youngster. Two hours' ride and we'll be a good 'eal cluser to 'em than we are now, but we've got to make our hosses show their mettle if we overtake them emigrants inside of six hours."

"Six hours!"

"Six hours. You'll have distance wrong every time if you don't b'ar in mind that you're on the plains. Them wagons ain't as near as they look. It's now 'bout noon. If we lose no more time than'll be required in puttin' away this fowl, we'll come up to 'em 'bout time the sun goes down."

They dismounted now, and hastily gathered together what little fuel they could find in that vicinity. A fire was made, the chicken roasted and devoured, and it was no sooner done than the three men were again in their saddles and on their way.

Two hours passed. They could see that they were steadily lessening the distance between them and the wagons, though they were still far apart.

Another hour passed. The wagons were very distinguishable now, with their white canvas tilts, and the horsemen, riding in advance, behind, and on either side of them, could also be seen. If no accident happened within the next three hours, Darrell said they would very nearly, if not quite, overtake the emigrants at the end of that time. Whether they themselves had as yet been discovered by the party in front, could not be determined by any manifestations on the part of the latter.

All at once the trapper drew rein with a sudden jerk. His companions followed his example, and looked at him for an explanation.

"What now?" queried Perkins.

"Look right in our path, straight ahead," said the trapper, coolly.

They looked as directed, and saw what they had before failed to notice, but which the watchful eyes of Darrell had not failed to observe. It was nothing more, however, than a single horseman riding along at some distance behind the main body of emigrants, as if some trifling accident had caused him to fall in the rear.

"Do you mean that solitary rider?"

"Sart'inly."

"I see nothing extraordinary there," said Adolphus.

"Nor I," added Weller.

The trapper looked at both of them, and a broad smile illumined his visage.

"Look ag'in," said he. "You think that feller's goin' t'other way. He ain't. He's movin' in this direction!"

"Coming toward us?"

Perkins and Weller looked at each other in surprise.

"What is he coming this way for?" asked the latter.

"That remains to be seen," was the quiet response.

"Do you think he belongs to the emigrant party?"

"Ruther think not—can't say fur sart'in. He's funder away from the wagons than he 'pears to be, and if I ain't powerful mistook, he's comin' this way. Yas, I know he is. Can't be likely he's comin' to meet us, and see who we be. Anybody 'd be a blamed fool to do that. Reckon he don't belong to the party. Hunter, maybe, comin' in from the mountains."

"Well, shall we sit here and wait for him to come up? or continue on our way?"

"Continue on our way, in course," returned the trapper.

Without more words they gave the animals the rein and galloped forward. Adolphus ventured the opinion that they would do well to turn aside from the trail, and give the horseman a wide berth, but he immediately abandoned it when he saw the look of blended drollery and surprise on Darrell's face. The trapper reminded him that if the stranger was a friend, all would be well—if an enemy, they were more than his match in numbers; consequently, there could be no danger in either case.

So they rode on, with unabated speed, toward the stranger, and the stranger rode on, with unabated speed, toward them. It soon became obvious even to the less experienced eyes of the two young men, that the stranger was really approaching, as the trapper had averred, and not receding, as they had at first supposed. The rate at which they and the opposite party were going, rapidly contracted the space between them, and Dusky Darrell was soon able to assert that the unknown rider was a white man. But the others had not thought of his being an Indian; therefore the discovery was neither a surprise nor a relief to them.

At last, when they were within a mile of each other, the stranger came to a dead halt. For a minute he sat stock-still in his saddle, apparently gazing at the approaching trio; then, with a yell that was borne faintly to the ears of our friends, he waved his hand over his head, turned aside from the trail, and dashed away at break-neck speed toward the south. With a side view thus presented, they saw the strange equestrian at a better advantage than before. He was, to all appearance, standing erect in his stirrups; his head was uncovered, and his long hair flying at the mercy of the wind, as was also a long, light mantle that streamed back from his shoulders. The steed he bestrode was large, well-built, and fleet-footed, and, altogether, the horse and rider presented a wild, picturesque aspect.

Our friends drew their animals down to a walk

and watched the strange being as he swiftly retreated southward.

"I knew he wouldn't have courage enough to meet us," said Adolphus, looking inexpressibly relieved.

"He is surely an Indian, after all," said Weller.

"A pale-face, or I'm mighty deceived," said Darrell.

"He looks like an Indian."

"He ain't, howsomever."

"Then he is a madman?"

"That's likely. But whoever he is, or whatever he is, he's a quare chap, shore as shootin'."

They watched the stranger as he sunk further and further into the distance—till he became a mere wavering speck on the horizon, and then disappeared altogether.

Now that this phenomenon was gone, and gone unexplained, our adventurers showed a determination to lose no more time by once more putting their horses to their speed, and dashing steadily forward on the track of the emigrants.

Just at sunset the emigrants came to a halt, and began to form their encampment for the night, after the fashion usually practiced on the plains. The wagons were placed as closely together as possible—wheels and tongue locked together—and arranged in a rude circle, so as to inclose a hollow space of ample dimensions for the congregation of the entire party, in the preparation and discussion of the evening meal.

It was immediately after the arrangement of the wagons was completed, that the trio of travelers rode upon the scene. Half a dozen men came out a short distance to meet them, and gave them a most cordial welcome. Among the number was Jack Weller's father, who shook his son warmly by the hand, and said it was a most agreeable surprise, and declared his mother and sister would be delighted, and that little Rosa Brown would be overjoyed. Mr. Weller proved his loquacity and parental affection, and then showed that he could be polite to strangers, by expressing his gratification that Jack had fallen into such worthy company on his journey. He sincerely hoped the trapper and Perkins would remain with them for many days, if not until their destination was reached, and expressed much regret when the trapper informed him he would have to leave them on the next morning.

As may be conjectured, Adolphus was burning with impatience to see one other member of the emigrating party, and he was glad when they at last entered the inclosure. No sooner were they within the circle of wagons, than they found themselves surrounded by strangers of all sizes and sexes. They all dismounted, and permitted Mr. Weller to take charge of their animals; then Adolphus began to look around in search of the fair being whose likeness he had had the exquisite pleasure of seeing every day for a week. While thus employed, his search was arrested by a joyful exclamation behind him:

"Jack, my dear boy!"

Then there were two exclamations in Jack's voice: "Mother! Julia!" followed by the sound of hearty kisses.

Adolphus whirled round, and as he did so, the

sight that met his eyes fairly took his breath for the moment. Jack Weller was exchanging greetings with two women. One of them was evidently his mother—a fine-looking lady of forty, or thereabouts, with regular features, slightly wrinkled, and a pleasant, smiling countenance. But the other was the one that riveted our hero's attention, and caused him to forget his good breeding so far as to stare almost rudely at her. In her he recognized the original of the copy he had found at Independence.

Beautiful Julia Weller! It would be folly to attempt anything like an accurate description of her charms. Language of ours cannot bring her before your imagination as she really was. Even Adolphus, who had seen her picture, and studied it by the hour, was surprised at first sight of her living self. The wealth of dark hair, falling about her shoulders in a shower of glossy curls—the arched eyebrows, faultlessly penciled by nature's brush—the classic forehead, and velvet cheeks—the rosy mouth, and glowing throat—all these he had seen in the miniature, and had thought the representation so life-like. But here was the sweet smile—the clear, musical voice—the ever-varying expression of her face—the crimson tide, surging beneath the transparent skin at each new motion—the large, brilliant orbs, whose bewildering beauty no artist could portray. These were charms Adolphus had scarcely thought of, and they sent a thrill through every pulse in his being. How soon he would have recovered himself, by his own efforts, it is impossible to say, but he was opportunely brought to his senses by the voice of his friend.

"Come, Perkins, allow me to make you acquainted with my mother and sister. Mother—Julia—this is my new but valued friend, Mr. Perkins, from Boston."

This precluded all possibility of escape, even if he had meditated such a thing. He was by no means a bashful man, but he blushed a little on this occasion, though he did not fail to execute a profound bow. He accepted gracefully the hand of each lady as it was extended to him, slightly pressing that of the younger one, and then appearing immeasurably confused in the consciousness that he had run the risk of incurring her displeasure.

"I had the good fortune, Miss Weller—ahem!—of finding your picture a short time since. Consequently, your face is not altogether unfamiliar to me," he stammered.

"Of finding my picture, sir?" she echoed, in astonishment.

"Yes, I—that is, you—I mean Jack, there; he had a portraiture of you, which he lost at Independence; and which I had the honor of finding. It was through it we became friends."

"Indeed?" She turned toward her brother with a smile. "You careless fellow! I can never safely intrust anything to your care again. It has not been a month since you lost that pretty locket uncle gave me, and but for this gentleman that miniature would have shared its fate."

"Then," said Jack, playfully twitching one of his sister's curls, "the accident of losing it must have been a fortunate one, or the accident of this gentleman's finding it must have been unfortunate."

"That is not clear."

"Isn't it? Suppose I had been more careful of the picture than I really was? In all probability you would never have met my esteemed friend, Mr. Perkins. Bearing that fact in mind, if you are still indignant at the temporary loss, you cannot be pleased at the liberty I have taken in introducing my friend. Is it clear now, my dear little lady?"

"No, 'tis not! I am sure Mr. Perkins is too wise to look at the affair in the light you do."

Adolphus bowed his acknowledgment of this compliment.

"At all events, Jack," said Mrs. Weller, "the finder is more to be commended than the loser, and I hope you did not neglect to thank your friend sufficiently."

"Surely," said Jack, "you cannot think me capable of wasting breath to thank the finder of so insignificant an article as that?"

Here Adolphus determined to make a striking remark.

"He offered his thanks, madam, but I could not accept them as a remuneration. They were not sufficient. Undoubtedly it was the height of impudence to desire a reward for so small an act, but, to confess the truth, nothing less than the picture itself would have been deemed a satisfactory compensation for the restoration."

They all laughed at this, and the peach-bloom on Julia's cheeks spread all over her face.

"I will not trouble you with the care of my miniature longer, Jack," said she, turning to him and holding out her hand.

He produced the diminutive subject of their conversation, and returned it to its owner. She scarcely glanced at it, but instantly handed it to Adolphus. Our hero was struck dumb with amazement.

"Take it," she said with a laughing glance at Jack. "I believe it will be safer in your hands than in those of my brother." Then growing serious, she added: "Please accept it, sir, not as a present, but as a simple memento—a token of friendship—for my brother's friends are always mine."

Adolphus's heart was beating against his vest, and was almost too full for utterance. He took the present, turned it over and over in his hand, and then managed to articulate:

"I did not expect this, Miss Weller. Your kindness is only excelled by your beauty. I am very, very thankful indeed, and I promise you that this handsome memento shall be cherished to my dying day, as the most highly valued of all my treasures."

"But where is your other friend, Jack?" asked Julia, skillfully turning the conversation into another channel.

"You mean Dusky Darrell?" said Jack. "Yonder he is, talking with father. He is one of the most distinguished trappers living, if Mr. Perkins's information is correct."

"And it is, I assure you," said Adolphus. "Darrell and I trapped together one season on the Yellowstone—"

"Ah! here comes Rosa!" exclaimed Jack just then.

Adolphus looked up at him, and saw his cheeks flush and his eyes sparkle. Then he looked around, and saw approaching, a young girl,

plainly but neatly dressed. She was small of stature but faultlessly formed, very pretty and very shy, smiling sweetly and blushing beautifully.

"I am glad to see you, Jack," she said, as she laid one of her little hands in his, in a confiding, affectionate way.

"And I am happy to find you well, my dear Rosa," he returned, stooping to kiss her brow.

Then the pretty, shy little maiden, whose name was Rosa Brown, was introduced to Adolphus, who understood at once that these two loved each other, and took no pains to conceal the fact. Poor Rosa was an orphan, who had never known her mother, and whose father had died years ago. Mr. Weller, her father's dearest friend in life, had taken her to his home in childhood, and reared her with his own children, who were so kind to her that the sorrow of her early bereavement was greatly alleviated. In course of time they all became so attached to her as to feel that if she were taken away, it would be like depriving them of one of their own family, and Jack had resolved that she never should be taken away.

By this time it was growing dark, and a number of fires were being lighted by the emigrants. In a few minutes the air was filled with the redolence of boiling viands, and industrious women were busy about the fires variously employed in the preparation of supper.

Dusky Darrell and Adolphus ate with the Weller family, and the latter was happy in securing a place close to the lovely Julia. He kept up an animated conversation with her during the entire meal, and was charmed by the rapidly-changing expression of her face. At times it would seem that she could not be anything but grave and earnest when talking, but the very next moment a ray of wit would flash like a ray of sunshine through the sober exterior, or her eyes would brighten with a gleam of mischief, showing that she was only a sunny-tempered, fun-loving girl, after all, sensible and educated though she was. Her laugh was low, rippling and musical, never too loud, but often hearty, and invariably infectious. Her charms were irresistible, and Adolphus believed he was nearly in love with her already!

After supper, Jack mentioned the strange horseman, whom he and his friend had seen that afternoon.

"He was a queer-looking specimen of humanity," observed Jack, as he quietly puffed his cigar, "though he bestrode a handsome, fleet-footed horse. At the distance from which we saw him, I should have judged that he was an Indian. He wore no hat, his hair was long, and his manner was wild and savage. But Darrell declared that he was a white man, and I have only to conclude that my impression was wrong. From the direction in which he was traveling when we first saw him, we supposed he had passed you, and had been in your midst. Do you know aught of the fellow, father?"

"Why, yes, my son, but little more than you know. You were mistaken in supposing that he had been among us, for none of us have seen him within less distance than half-a-mile. The fact is, this same mysterious stranger has dogged us ever since we left the settlements,

and we have grown somewhat accustomed to him. Sometimes he rides in a circle around us, waving his arms in every conceivable manner, as though trying to communicate some intelligence to us by signs."

"Hain't yer never s'picioned as how he mought be up to some sort of deviltry?" inquired Darrell.

"No; such a thing has not occurred to us. Our guide, who is a very sagacious person, assures us that we need expect no danger from him. He says he has seen the man many times before, and knows him to be perfectly harmless, though inane."

"Insane?"

"Wild—mad—a raving maniac!"

"Exactly. Who is your guide? What's his handle?"

"Nim Dedzel."

"What!" exclaimed Darrell, exhibiting some astonishment.

"Hush!" said Mr. Weller. "Yonder he is now, if you wish to see him. That is our guide."

CHAPTER IV.

THE GUIDE UNDER SURVEILLANCE.

MR. WELLER was pointing over the trapper's shoulder. He turned his head to look, as did the rest of the party, and saw near by a man, walking slowly up and down a small clear space, with the air of one whose mind is buried in profound reverie. Judging from his dark, lowering brow, and the look of savage discontent he wore, his thoughts were not extremely pleasant. His arms were folded over his breast; he smoked his pipe with long, vigorous pulls, sending volume upon volume of smoke into the air; and he set his feet on the ground as if he were vengefully crushing the life out of somebody at every step. He was tall, broad-shouldered and heavily-built, and his dress and accouterments were similar to those usually worn by hunters and trappers of the Western prairie. Ever and anon the light of a camp-fire would reveal his dark visage. It was not a pleasant visage to look upon, either, but was one with which the most indifferent observer could not be favorably impressed at first sight, and Adolphus thought the man would make an excellent model for the representation of an Italian brigand, or a Spanish pirate.

"That," said Mr. Weller again, "is our guide. That is Nim Dedzel."

"The very man, or I'm a ghost!" muttered the trapper, with a distrustful look at the object of his remark.

"Do you know him?" asked Mr. Weller.

Instead of replying to this question, the trapper inquired:

"How come yer to git him fur a guide?"

"I cannot tell. His services were already engaged when we arrived at Independence. But why do you ask?"

"I s'pose he's proved satisfactory so fur?"

"Most assuredly! Nobody has found the slightest cause of complaint in him. He is shrewd, brave and prudent, and although he is sometimes surly and gruff without any visible cause, I believe he will do all that is expected of him."

The trapper did not answer. It was evident that the sight of the man called Nim Dedzel had set him to thinking, and, as he relapsed into silence, the subject was discontinued.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and when the little party around the camp-fire had broken up, Jack proposed a stroll on the prairie. So Jack and Rosa and Adolphus and Julia left the circle of wagons, and wandered down to the river-bottom near by. Adolphus was elevated to the seventh heaven of delight then, and he openly vowed that he had never enjoyed a moonlight walk as he did that one. The fair being at his side clung to his arm so trustingly, as if consigning herself to his protection, and he felt that if nothing else could make him brave in time of danger, her confidence could. He drank in every word she uttered, and long before the walk was over he caught himself wishing that he might live forever so near to her witching smile and thrilling voice. Also he began to think that California was no fitting place for one of her rare beauty and refinement, and asked himself if it were absolutely necessary that she should "waste her sweetness on the desert air."

When they parted for the night, Adolphus wandered about the inclosure in search of Dusky Darrell. For some time he was unsuccessful, and began to wonder what had become of his friend; but at the very moment he relinquished the search, he saw the trapper standing silently in the shadow of one of the wagons. He walked up to him and spoke. Darrell did not move, but stood as still as the wagon itself, leaning on his rifle. Adolphus stared at him in astonishment, and then he made the discovery that the trapper was gazing steadfastly at something, as if piercing it through and through with his keen orbs. Following the course of his friend's eye, our hero saw the guide, Nim Dedzel, a few yards away, sitting on a stone in the light of the camp-fire, still smoking his pipe, and still, apparently, buried in thought. As nobody else was in range of his eyes, Nim Dedzel was certainly the person watched.

And why?

Adolphus spoke again:

"What are you looking at, Darrell?"

This time he drew a long breath, and slowly turned his head toward his interrogator.

"Lookin' at nothin'," he replied, calmly. "Cogitatin' a trifle—that's all."

Adolphus looked suspiciously from him to Nim Dedzel, and from Nim Dedzel to him, but observing that Darrell chose to conceal the truth, he forebore making further inquiries on that topic.

After some unimportant conversation, he and Darrell laid down upon the ground, rolled themselves in their blankets and consigned themselves to rest and slumber, in which nearly all of the emigrants had preceded them. Adolphus lay awake a long time, gazing up at the stars, thinking of the miniature he had coveted so much and now possessed, and persistently misconstruing the object of its owner in presenting it to him. When at last he closed his eyes, the fair Julia haunted his dreams the rest of the night.

Next morning the emigrants were astir at an

early hour. When the horsemen were all in their saddles, and the wagons began to move, our hero found himself alone with the trapper.

"Darrell," said he, holding out his hand, "you said you were determined to leave this morning, and I suppose the time for saying farewell has come. I hate to say it, Darrell—hanged if I don't! It's a dem'd nuisance, that's what it is. But, you see, I have no desire to spend another season in the trapping regions; not to mention the fact that this party is needful of able-bodied men like me, for the protection of the females, you know. Ahem!"

"Jist put a stopper on that clappin' apparatus of you'n, will yer?" coolly interrupted the other. "If yer thinks I'm goin' to leave yer to-day, yer powerful mistook, that's all. I've come to the determination to travel with these emigrants fur awhile, and to freeze to 'em till I've made a diskivery. Like as not, Spider, we won't have to turn tail on one another fur several days."

Adolphus was delightfully surprised.

"What in creation has caused this change in your plans?" he asked. "You must have an important purpose in view since, to accomplish it, you take a portion of the time belonging to your vocation."

"I'm not sart'in what all that gibberish amounts to, but I reckon you ain't fur from the truth. The fact is, my s'picious have got to be confirmed, or, blowed higher'n a kite."

"I don't understand."

"Wal, then, to speak plainer lingo, I'm goin' to turn detective fur no other purpose than to keep an eye on this yer guide, Nim Dedzel."

Adolphus had suspected this, and was not surprised.

"Why are you so suspicious of him?" he asked.

"Does he look to you like a honest man?" demanded the trapper.

"Hagnation—not! At first sight of him I thought he looked more like a cut-throat."

"Wal, he ain't nothin' shorter, I opine."

"Oh, thunder! you can't be in earnest?"

"Do I appear to be jokin'?" said the trapper, almost sternly. "See yer', Spider; this are not the fu'st time I've see'd Nim Dedzel—not by a long shot—and if you ever knowed Dusky Darrell to misplace a s'picion, you know more 'bout it than Darrell hisself. I s'picioned that man the fu'st time I sot eyes on him, and I'll tell yer why. It war 'bout four years ago, 'cordin' to my recollek, and I see'd him in friendly confab with that great chief of the Cheyennes, Turtle-head. I didn't hear a word they said, but I knowed thar never was a greater enemy to the pale-faces than that same Turtle-head. The next time I see'd him war in a drunken row at Westport. He had gambled all his money away at a card-table, and then had drawed a bowie, and bawled out at the top of his voice that he'd have the life of the feller as won his gold. But the other chap fetched him a swipe across the muzzle, and the cowardly whelp slunk away like a prairie-wolf. The last time I see'd him 'fore this war jist two year ago this month, at Fort Leavenworth. I war on my way to the trappin' grounds, and stopped thar a day to refresh my

self and boss. When I arrove at the fort I found that an emigrant-party of the smaller kind had halted thar. It was a party of fortune-hunters on tha'r way to the diggin's—all men—no wimmen or children among 'em. And tha'r guide war the same Nim Dedzel. I didn't think much 'bout it then, but when I came down to the settlements the next summer, I found out sunkthin' that made me s'picion the cuss more'n ever. The party I met at Fort Leavenworth had got as fur as the Rocky Mountains, when they war 'tacked by Crow Injuns. Every man was butchered 'cept Dedzel, and how he give the red devils the slip nobody knows to this day. He come trottin' back by hisself, tellin' a big story 'bout the massakree, and then he lounged 'bout the forts and settlements for more'n a month, drinkin' whisky and spendin' money like dirt, and it struck this beaver as how he didn't come by his money honest!"

"Good Lord!" cried Adolphus, who had begun to grow a little pale as the trapper approached the close of his speech. "You certainly cannot mean to intimate that the fellow led that party of gold-seekers into danger *purposely*? You cannot mean that?"

"Can't I?" coolly responded the trapper. "Maybe not, but hyur's as don't hold Nim Dedzel above the deed."

"You don't say! Thunderation! Who knows but that the scoundrel will lead us into some outlandish place, and let the red-skins clip off our scalps one by one! Oh, blazes! it's too horrible to contemplate. I say, Darrell, don't you think it would be best, on second thought, to go off on your trapping excursion without delay, instead of forcing yourself upon the hospitality of these emigrants. If you would come to that conclusion, maybe I could be persuaded to accompany you, and spend the season in your mountain home."

"Wagh! don't be a baby, Spider. Ef you're afeard to stay—"

"Afraid? Ha! ha! ha! Me afraid? The ideal! Why, on my word, you certainly forget to whom you are speaking."

"It's jist likely," continued the trapper, "that this yer' guide means mischief. I'll sw'ar he's a friend of the Cheyennes—I s'picion he's got the good-will of the Crows—and smash me if I'd stake much that he ain't on good terms with the color in ginerel. I'm goin' to keep the cuss under my twinklers till I Parn his intentions, and then if his plans don't promise safety to these people, we must try to nip 'em in the bud. Hyur's what considers hisself a match fur Nim Dedzel, every day in the week."

"And here's another," said Adolphus pompously.

Here the conversation was interrupted by the approach of Jack Weller, and as Darrell desired to let none of the emigrants know of his suspicion at present, he communicated as much to Adolphus by a sign.

The trapper then galloped forward and joined the guide, with whom he was seen to enter into conversation in a free and pleasant manner. Adolphus and Jack rode side by side, sometimes in front of the train, sometimes behind, and often swerving to one side. They conversed on various topics, of course, but Adolphus never

liked so well to hear his friend talk as when he was speaking of his sister, and to "draw him out," he frequently resorted to the artifice of praising the Gypsy-like beauty of little Rosa Brown.

Thus the day passed.

At sunset they went into camp, just as they had done on the preceding evening, and in the same manner practiced every night since their departure from the settlements. Once more supper was cooked and eaten, and once more our hero found more enjoyment in his position close to the fair Julia than he did in the discussion of the meal. Then came another moonlight stroll on the prairie by the young folks, while the elder ones, especially the men—though including several women—resigned themselves to the soothing influence of their pipes. Night deepened. Strolling and smoking were soon given up, and one by one the entire party retired to rest. No guards were appointed, the guide assuring them that none but himself need remain awake, since an attack from Indians was not to be thought of that night.

Dusky Darrell spread his blanket on the ground, within a dozen yards of the spot where the guide had taken his stand, and stretched himself upon it as if he were very tired and sleepy. On one side of the inclosure a gap had been left between two wagons, looking out upon the prairie toward the west. In this opening Nim Dedzel had stationed himself, to watch over the sleeping emigrants. Here he walked slowly backward and forward, now in the shadows and now in the full light of the moon, keeping a sharp lookout for danger, and ostensibly as faithful as he could be to the responsibility he bore. The hours slipped by, and he did not leave his post, but kept up as sharp and unremitting a watch as he could have done were it absolutely necessary, which he himself had declared it was not.

Shortly after midnight, however, when everybody but himself seemed locked in slumber, there was a change in his movements which would certainly have attracted attention and caused surprise, had there been any one awake to see him. First he paused and stood still for some minutes, gazing keenly around. Then, dropping to a stooping posture, he moved away from the opening, and began to glide through the shadows of the wagons, stopping at every wagon as if listening, and then moving stealthily on. In this manner he went completely round the circle, and paused at the starting-point.

After that the guide remained stationary for a short time. Then, as if struck by a new thought, he walked straight to the spot where Dusky Darrell was lying wrapped in his blanket. Bending low over the silent form of the trapper, he gazed searchingly at his face, and listened to his deep, regular breathing. Seeming satisfied with what he saw and heard, he resumed his upright position, and muttered to himself:

"Sound asleep. Nothin' to be feared from him. Ef he don't s'pect anything, nobody does; tharfore, I'll jist consider myself safe. Bah! ef Dusky Darrell goes to findin' out more'n he ought to know, I'll show him some night how a few inches of tempered steel kin silence a man. He! he! he!"

With this, the fellow turned on his heel and

walked away. Once more he stood stock-still in the gap, casting hurried glances about him for a minute or two, as if to make sure that he was not watched. Then, in a crouching attitude, he hastily left his post and glided out upon the open prairie, leaving the camp to take care of itself.

No sooner had he taken this sudden flight from the encampment, than Detective Dusky Darrell slowly raised his head and looked after him. Then, with the stealth of a cat, he rose to his feet, wrapped his blanket around him and crept to the opening. The next moment he had left the inclosure—left the sleeping camp—and was following in the footsteps of the guide.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPIES ON DUTY.

DARRELL had been feigning sleep for the purpose of watching Nim Dedzel. Having observed that that person was particularly desirous that none but himself should remain awake, it became at once a settled point in the trapper's mind that something was to be done that night, which the doer thereof deemed advisable to enact without the knowledge of his employers. And, with this conclusion, he had resolved to be a detective upon Dedzel's actions.

When he saw Dedzel leave the camp, he did not hesitate an instant about following. He determined that if anything was done he would be a witness to it. Once upon the open prairie, in the full, bright light of the moon, he saw the guide some distance ahead, moving swiftly on, as if in a great hurry to have the affair over. Fearful that the man would look back and discover him, he stooped till his head was almost on a level with his knees, and then darted forward, noiselessly but boldly, on the track of the distrusted party. Instead of remaining so far behind that he could just see the figure in front, as might have been expected of him, he moved at a swifter pace than that of the guide. His object in doing this was to get so near that he could see the guide distinctly, and be ready to drop in the grass whenever he glanced back over his shoulder.

It soon became obvious that Dedzel's destination was a grove of oak trees about a mile from the camp. This grove resembled an island on the ocean, as it rested like a dark blotch on the bosom of the broad, level plain, and by the name of islands such groves are frequently called by prairie-men. Darrell could not but wonder what his errand to such a place could be, and he was determined to find out if he could do so by keeping the object of his suspicion in sight. Twice he was compelled to throw himself on the ground, to escape the keen eyes of Dedzel as they shot backward, and both times his wonderful quickness saved him from discovery.

They soon neared the grove. Dedzel slackened his pace as he entered the shadows of the trees, and his pursuer did the same. A few more steps and Dedzel disappeared. The trapper did not wait an instant then, but darted forward like a flash, and in another moment he, too, was under cover of the darkness that pervaded the patch of timber. Here he paused, and hugged the trunk of a large oak tree, standing perfectly still to

take breath and listen. They were both in the grove now, where the moonlight did not penetrate, and he could no longer see the guide. As he listened, however, he heard footsteps slowly receding through the wood. This showed that the guide was still moving on, and had not discovered him.

Darrell was about to follow by the sound of footsteps, when he was checked by the low neigh of a horse close at hand, and the stamp of an iron-shod hoof on the turf. Within the same minute a strange voice cried out, impatiently:

"Whoa! Stand still, you fool, or I'll larrup you till you have a cause for being restless!"

Somewhat astonished, Darrell stepped quickly back and again stood as close to the tree-trunk as possible. In this position, resembling a part of the tree itself, he listened for an explanation of the mystery. Presently that same strange voice exclaimed:

"Hello, Dedzel! Is that you?"

And then came the reply, in a voice quite familiar to the listener:

"In course it's me. Didn't suppose 'twas anybody else, did ycu?"

"No; I'm glad you come."

"Bah! yer didn't think I'd furgit? That ain't Nim Dedzel's style. I knowed this was the fu'st place of meetin', and yer' I am, and yer' you are, and we'd better be quick about it."

"Well, has any suspicion been placed upon me?"

"Not any. Thar was at fu'st, but I settled that."

"Good! I shall come in sight every day, and if anything extraordinary happens you can communicate to me."

"That'll do."

"It will be a pretty good haul, I suppose?"

"Devilish good."

"How much?"

"Thre thousand in gold and silver."

"So much?"

"No less."

A prolonged whistle of surprise.

"It will be well worth our trouble then."

"That's my calculation."

"Well, I have a strong body under my command."

"Have, hey? When shall the thing take place?"

"In about three weeks."

"Whar?"

"In Bloody Hollow, on the banks of Devil's Creek. Ha! ha! I guess you know where that is, since those names originated with you."

"Wal, I reckon that's the proper place for't. Don't fail. See't yer comes up to the scratch, whatever happens."

"Trust me for that."

And there the conversation ended.

Immediately following the last words, the stranger was heard to chirrup sharply to his horse, and then there was a crashing of brush-wood as the animal moved away. Before that noise ceased to be heard, Nim Dedzel brushed by the trapper so close that their garments nearly touched. Watching him like a serpent, Darrell saw him leave the grove and hurry across the open prairie toward the camp. Then Darrell wrapped his blanket tightly around him, crouch-

ed so low that he was almost concealed by the grass, and darted after the guide.

Thus they both returned to camp. When they reached the wagons the guide resumed his post in the entrance to the inclosure, filled his pipe and lit it, as if he had no intention of closing his eyes that night. Darrell made a *detour*, by worming himself through the grass, and crawled under a wagon, with all the stealth he could command. He regained his position undiscovered, and once more laid down to rest. But there was no sleep for him now. His mind was so occupied with what had just transpired that sleep was entirely out of the question. His thoughts were full of what he had heard. Every word of that strange dialogue passed again and again through his mind, in regular procession. Dedzel's remark about three thousand in gold and silver being a good haul, caused him no little anxiety, for that very day he remembered to have heard one of the emigrants observe that there was about that amount of hard money in the party, and he could not rid himself of the belief that it was this money Dedzel had alluded to. During all the hours that intervened between that time and dawn, he lay there and thought of it. By watching the guide, he had seen and heard more than he had expected to see and hear, and the result was that his suspicions were in a measure confirmed. There no longer existed a doubt in his mind that Nim Dedzel was a villain and a traitor.

When morning broke, and the party began to stir about, making the usual preparations for another day's journey, Darrell left his sleepless resting-place and began to do the same. But he was unusually silent and grave, and more than once as he moved about he shot a threatening glance at the guide from his piercing orbs. He did not deem it advisable to tell the people what had transpired while they slumbered, excepting Adolphus, to whom he related the whole circumstance just as it occurred. Adolphus was considerably alarmed, and declared they could not do better than to let the emigrants know all about it, so that the fellow could be discharged at once. But Darrell said they would keep their own counsel, and wait.

"One third on 'em wouldn't believe it," said he, "if I should tell 'em. They all have faith in him, apparently, and if I war to open my head they mought think I's the one as had deviltry in my noddle. I'll let the matter rest awhile, and keep up my detective work, and if I kin git a chance to prove the fellow's treachery, in time to save tha'r lives, hyur's what'll do his durned-est."

"You really think he meditates mischief to this party?"

"I does."

That afternoon the mysterious rider who had been dogging the wagon-train, once more made his appearance. The emigrants called him the Wild Horseman, and none of them seemed to experience the slightest uneasiness at his coming, but were rather amused as they watched his insane actions. This time he came from the south, and approached at a steady canter. For a long time he kept this course, but at length, when within less than a mile of the wagons, he suddenly changed to another direction. Gov-

erned by a single movement of the hand that held the reins, the large, handsome horse swerved to one side with a graceful demi-volt, and began to perform a circle round the wagons. Every one watched the unknown rider with more or less interest, as he began to sweep round them, with his long hair and mantle flapping unheeded in the wind. At one time he would throw himself back in the saddle and wave his arms wildly in the air; at another, he would rise in the stirrups, lean forward and urge the fleet-footed animal to its best speed, as if a legion of devils was in hot pursuit. In this manner he completed the circle, and then with a shrill, maniacal cry, and a parting wave of the hand, he cantered leisurely away in a southerly direction, toward the point from which he had come.

"That chap's crazy as a loon," said the guide to Darrell, when the rider had disappeared in the distance.

"Think so?" was the short response.

"Don't think nothin' 'bout it. I know it."

"Thar's room for more'n one opinion thar," said Darrell, significantly, and, without stopping to note the effect of his words, he turned away, and joined Adolphus and Jack.

It is not worth while to particularize every day and every incident of that tedious journey across the plain. Day after day, and week after week passed away, and nothing worthy of record occurred to vary the weary monotony. Dusky Darrell occupied much of his time in thinking of what had transpired in the grove, and after that Nim Dedzel was watched like a hawk, morning, noon, and night, Adolphus often relieving his friend when nature demanded rest for the latter. He secretly resolved that he would never leave the party till satisfied that nothing more was to be apprehended from the cunning villainy of the guide.

The Wild Horseman made his appearance nearly every day. Sometimes he described a circle round them, riding with the speed of the wind; at other times he merely crossed their path in front or behind; but invariably he executed his entire pantomimic performance, to the amusement of his traveling audience. His actions were indubitably those of a madman; and as such he was regarded, almost without an exception. Sometimes it was thought that Dusky Darrell had his doubts on that point, but the trapper was as inaccessible as an oyster on the subject.

One evening, more than three weeks after the memorable night on which Darrell had been a witness to the suspicious actions of Nim Dedzel, the wagon-train was once more brought to a halt on the approach of darkness. The encampment was formed after the usual fashion, and by ten o'clock everybody was asleep, with the single exception of Adolphus Perkins. Darrell had whispered to him just before dark, charging him to remain awake and keep watch, while he himself caught a little sleep for the restoration of exhausted nature. The detective also gave orders that he should be instantly awakened if anything extraordinary occurred, and was promised obedience. So this was the reason that Adolphus was awake when the rest were locked in slumber.

He thought of a thousand things, and, at last, when every other subject for reflection was exhausted, he remembered, with a start, that he had been charged to watch Nim Dedzel! He was lying on his blanket, so as to appear asleep, and the thought had no sooner struck him than he turned his head to look at the man. What was his surprise and consternation, when he made the discovery that Nim Dedzel had disappeared, and was nowhere to be seen?

"Confound it," he growled, "I should like to know where the deuce the slippery fellow has gone? Why couldn't he stay here and behave himself? No good will come of his ungentlemanly conduct. I'm positive of that. Oh, Lord!"

The exclamation with which Adolphus concluded his soliloquy was uttered in a husky, frightened whisper.

He turned pale. His eyes started half out of their sockets, and fastened themselves upon some object with a scared look. The object in question was nothing more nor less than a human figure. It was crawling under a wagon—crawling slowly and softly, as if intent upon entering the camp unseen—and coming directly toward him! It was but a little distance away—under the nearest wagon—and unless it changed its course, would soon be on the spot where he was sitting.

For a moment Adolphus stared at the figure, and then, almost breathless with terror, he lay down and covered his head with his blanket. In this position, breathing huskily and short, his heart throbbing wildly and fast, he silently awaited his fate. He fully believed the intruder was coming to kill him, and he well-nigh smothered himself with his blanket, with a vague feeling that there was hope in such a concealment. He heard the stranger coming, slowly, stealthily—heard him crawling close to his head—heard him pass—and then the sound died out, and all was still. This surprised Perkins. The intruder had undoubtedly passed on without noticing him. For some moments he lay still, thinking it too good to be true; then, with a determination to be bold, he ventured to throw aside the blanket and raise his head.

As he did this, the first thing he saw was the very figure that had startled him so. It was not on all-fours now, but standing erect. He could see the outline of the form, and a form of Herculean mold it was—tall, muscular, massive. At its feet, something lying silently on the ground attracted his notice. This something was the prostrate body of a man, evidently unconscious in slumber. Adolphus gave a tremendous start, and half-rose to his feet. He remembered who the sleeping man was—it was no other than Dusky Darrell.

The intruder was standing over him, apparently looking down upon his upturned face. God of heaven! what was it that he saw? A knife glittering in the stranger's hand! Horror! He was going to murder the trapper as he slept!

This was too much for Adolphus. With a yell that might have done justice to a half-dozen throats, he sprung to his feet.

"Help! Murder! Fire!" he shrieked. "Fire! Murder! Help! Wake up, Darrell, if you don't

want to be killed! Hangnation! Blood and thunder! Help! Nigger in the pit! Oh—oh—oh! Put him out! Roll up, tumble up—h-e-l-p!"

The noise was almost sufficient to wake the Seven Sleepers. Darrell jumped up as if he were struck, and confronted his would-be assassin. The latter staggered back, hurled his knife to the ground, and turned his blazing eyes upon Adolphus. Then was made the startling discovery that the midnight prowler was not a stranger, as had been supposed, but *Nim Dedzel, the guide!*

Then there was a slight commotion in camp. Quite a number of people were awakened by the vociferous cries of Adolphus, and while some merely looked out of the wagons and inquired the cause of the disturbance, others rushed excitedly to the spot, and surrounded the three men with a clamor of interrogations.

As soon as Perkins could speak intelligibly, he explained briefly that the guide had been sneaking about with a knife in his hand, and that he was on the point of stabbing Darrell, when he had seen proper to interrupt the murderer by shouting to the trapper. Dedzel, with his arms folded over his broad chest, looked at the speaker with a smile of contempt, and said:

"I s'pose you all b'lieve what he says. Hel hel hol! The feller's been dreamin', I take it, or else he's a blamed coward!"

"Oh, what a hel!" returned Perkins. "I first saw you under that wagon. You were on your hands and knees, crawling toward me. You passed on to Darrell. You were about to stab him when I raised my voice."

Adolphus was terribly excited; Dedzel was cool.

"I was jist walkin' around," said the latter, addressing the crowd. "I was passin' this spot when that spindle-shanked cuss jumped up and begun to squawk like a skeered pappoose."

"Demnition! you're an awful liar." Why, here's the very knife which you had raised over my friend."

And as he spoke, Adolphus stooped and picked up the knife which he had seen in Dedzel's hand.

"That sticker don't belong to me," said the guide, coolly. "Here's mine, in my belt."

Dusky Darrell looked at the weapon, and instantly declared that it was his property. Then a loud laugh was raised at our hero's expense.

"I don't care a straw!" yelled the exasperated fellow. "He took it out of Darrell's belt—that's what he did."

"Don't say any more, Spider," whispered Darrell, close to his ear. "They won't believe you now, if you blow all night."

The crowd dispersed, with many jokes and outbursts of laughter, and once more "turned in," all under the impression that Adolphus had been the victim of a frightful dream.

CHAPTER VI.

IN HIS OWN TRAP.

LITTLE was said the next day about Perkins's midnight adventure. Once in a while some waggish fellow would fling a joke at him for being frightened in his sleep, but no one thought of putting any weight upon the accusation made

against the guide. And so it afforded little food for conversation.

During the latter part of the day, Perkins and Darrell found themselves riding alone at some distance behind the caravan, and then the subject was discussed by them for the first time.

"I say, Darrell," said the exquisite, in a troubled voice, "don't you believe what I told you last night? You didn't think I was lyin', did you, in what I said about Nim Dedzel?"

"I believed all that you said," was the reply.

"That the scoundrel was going to puncture your person?"

"Exactly."

"And that my interference prevented him from so doin'?"

"Sart'in."

"Then why the deuce didn't you say so on the spot, and maybe they wouldn't have had the ill-manners to laugh at me as they did?"

"Bah! tha'r laughin' 'mounted to nothin', and thar was no needcessity fur me to open my mouth. That knife could never been out of my belt 'less 'twas tuck out by human hands, that's said. But these chaps is fresh from the States, b'ar in mind, and green as hammered elm, and con'squently they ain't goin' to give up tha'r faith in Nim Dedzel till sunkthin's proved ag'in' him. But never mind: I'll open tha'r eyes to-night."

"How?"

"No matter; I'll do it, sure's shootin'. The stranger as I heerd talkin' to Green that night in the grove, said sunkthin' war to happen 'bout three weeks from that time. It's been now nigh onto four weeks and I've been expectin' that ar' sunkthin' fur two or three days."

"And you think it will occur to-night?"

"I wouldn't bet ag'in' it."

"Good gracious! maybe it'll be something dreadful."

"More'n possible."

"Maybe they'll blow us all up with gunpowder while we're asleep."

"Hyur's what this beaver thinks. Them two pale-faces are leagued with Injuns."

"Well?"

"And them Injuns are sp'ilin' fur a skulldance, while the whites are hankerin' arter the money as belongs to these people."

"Thunderation! You don't believe it, though?"

"I does."

Adolphus began to breathe hard.

"This is terrible," he said, wiping the perspiration from his brow with a perfumed handkerchief. "I don't like such nonsense as this, and I won't stand it! It makes a man feel cold to think about it. I tell you what we can do, though. We are under no obligations to any one here and if we should slide out at once, and leave them to take care of themselves, we might escape with our hair, you see."

He ceased speaking as he observed the dark frown settle like a thundercloud on the trapper's brow.

"Spider, I'm ashamed of you," he said, almost severely. "I allus knowed you war afeard of reds, but smash me if I didn't think you war more of a man than to talk in that

style at a time like this. If I ain't awfully fooled, you're struck arter that purty Weller gal, but as soon as danger comes you're willin' to give her up, leave her to a horrible fate, and git. Is that the sort of a man you are? If 'tis, hyur's as wants no more to do with you."

Adolphus turned scarlet, and dropped his eyes with shame.

"Hang it!" he exclaimed, "it does seem devilish cowardly in me to think of nobody but myself. Poor Julia! Suppose she should be killed? Gracious what a fool I am! I'm a clam! I'm a bug! I'm everything! To be candid with you, I'm deeply in love with that charming maiden!"

"You don't deserve her."

"Now don't say that, Darrell; please don't! I'm not so great a coward as you think. I'm not really afraid of Indians, but I don't like them—not any. I spoke thoughtlessly a moment ago; I will stay and see the fracas through. Wherever my dear Julia is, there I shall find it a pleasure to be, though surrounded by dangers of the most appalling kind."

"Now you're talkin'."

"But, see here, Darrell," continued Adolphus, stammeringly, "don't you think you had better warn the emigrants of their peril, before this thing takes place? In that case they could be on their guard, and perhaps we would not then be—wiped out, you know?"

"Leave that bizness to me, youngster."

And there the subject was dropped.

That evening they turned aside from the trail about half a mile, and went into camp. The place was well-chosen—even Dusky Darrell admitted that. It was in a small hollow in the prairie, and through one side of it ran a small river, or creek as it was called, deep enough at that point to render fording impossible. It was an abrupt bend in this stream that had been selected for the encampment, so that when the wagons were locked together in their usual manner, and everything was prepared for the night, the emigrants found themselves defended on three sides by impassable water.

"This," said the guide, "is Bloody Holler, and the stream runnin' through it are Devil's Crick. I give 'em them names myself, and no others would 'a' been half so 'propriate."

"Indeed?" returned Jack Weller. "You have stopped here before, then?"

"Wal, I jist had," responded the guide, emphatically, with a covert twinkle in his snake-like orbs.

"And why did you give this the name of Bloody Hollow?"

Dedzel hesitated before replying to this inquiry, and looked as though he would like to say something if he could but deem it prudent to do so. However, he merely remarked:

"I hain't time to tell you the story now, youngster, but afore we leave this place I'll warrant as you will be convinced that Bloody Holler is the proper name for't."

With this he walked away, chuckling slyly to himself.

Before it had grown dark, Darrell began his self-imposed task. Taking great pains that the guide should not observe his movements, and divine their import, he went to every man separately and talked to him briefly and hurried-

ly. In most cases his whispered words created perceptible excitement, and looks of surprise, doubt, indignation and vindictiveness were freely bestowed upon the unsuspecting guide, while a few were observed to turn pale and shudder.

When his task was done, Darrell went to Adolphus with sparkling eyes and a smile of triumph.

"Now we'll see who wins," said he, in a low tone. "I've put every man on his guard, and it's my opinion we'll have a lively time hyur to-night. Some on 'em don't believe thar's any cause for s'picion, but all admit that no harm kin come of bein' ready fur 'mergencies. I told 'em how to act. They're not to do or say anything that will give Dedzel the least idee of what's goin' on. They're to go to bed to-night, jist as usual, but not to sleep, and the very minute I gives the word every one on 'em comes forth ready fur duty."

"Good!" said Perkins, approvingly. "You've arranged things handsomely. But, judging from your zeal in this, you seem perfectly satisfied that the aforesaid *thing* will take place to-night."

"I'd e'en a'most sw'ar to it."

"Then, my friend, our opinions differ. My view of the affair is just this: if the fellow had meditated harm to us during this halt, he would not have chosen a locality so disadvantageous for attack."

Darrell shook his head.

"That ain't my view of the case, by a long shot. Dedzel's object in selectin' this pint fur a stoppin'-place are to pull the wool over our eyes, and make us think he's awful keerful. But 'tain't often this beaver gits hoodwinked in that style. This is a good sitiuation fur defense—no two ways 'bout *that*—but what chance would we have to defend ourselves if a body of reds war to come down on us while we's all asleep? That's the way they intend to work the thing, and they wouldn't leave a grease-spot of us if tha'r plan 'u'd succeed. But we'll see how it turns out now."

That evening, as they ate their supper and smoked their pipes, the only change perceptible in the emigrants was their unusual silence and gravity. Nim Dedzel was obviously in a very good humor, having a good-natured word for every one he met. Upon being questioned as to whether he would station guards over the camp that night, he replied that such a precaution was absolutely unnecessary.

"Howsomever," he added, "I'll stay awake myself and see that nothin' comes nigh. If I git sleepy toward the middle of the night, I'll rouse one of the men and let him take my place."

When the proper time arrived all "turned in," just as usual, and as naturally as if it were to obtain their customary rest and sleep. In a few minutes silence brooded over the camp—silence deep and solemn—and the traveling winds paused to hover about the canvas tilts for awhile, as if warning the inmates of the approaching peril, and then, with a gentle sigh, passed on.

No one seemed awake except Nim Dedzel. He reclined on the soft grass near the entrance

to the inclosure, quietly smoking his pipe, and looking complacently about him at the score of heavy wagons forming a semicircle on the river-bank. There was something more than complacency, there was exultation in his look—a greedy anticipation of triumph, and a golden harvest. He gazed at the silent caravan as though it were in his power, and he was already free to rummage it from one end to the other.

About two hours after the last man had retired, the guide ceased smoking, put his pipe out of sight, and cautiously rose from his recumbent position. He then drew his cap down to his very eyes, tightened his belt, took up his rifle, cast a last searching look over the encampment, and darted through the opening as noiselessly as a serpent. He was gone, leaving the camp unguarded.

As soon as he was out of sight, a figure rose silently from the ground where it had been lying as motionless as the ground itself. It was the figure of Dusky Darrell. He had been feigning sleep skillfully enough to deceive the most acute observer, but his detective eyes had scarcely left the reposing form of the guide. Now he glided to the opening and looked out. Dedzel was hurrying away, and fast disappearing in the darkness.

"Go on, you varmint," growled the trapper, as he turned away. "Go on, and bring yer copper-skinned crew to lift our ha'r, if that's yer game; but smash me if yer doesn't find us ready to receive you. It'll be a complete surprise, sart'in, but the surprise'll all be on t'other side."

With this he began to arouse the camp. From wagon to wagon he went, lifting the cover of every one successively, and addressing a few words to its inmates in a low tone. When this was done he passed among those lying on the ground, and gave them the word. Several had fallen asleep as they waited, but they were easily awakened by the low, penetrating voice of Darrell.

In a few minutes the area was swarming with dark figures. Women with blanched faces huddled together on the banks of the stream, straining their children to their bosoms, and raining tears upon their helpless heads. Poor mothers! they knew not how soon their little darlings would be torn from their arms, and butchered before their eyes. Men hurried to and fro, excitedly—but in silence, some looking to the priming of their guns, others filling their powder-flasks and bullet-pouches, while a few, who had no preparations to make, took this opportunity of comforting their wives and children. No one seemed to entertain a doubt, now, that the guide was a traitor, and that he was about to show them convincing proof of his treachery. Else, why had he stolen away, like a thief, at that hour of the night? A number of them had seen him go, and were positive that his departure was premeditated. They now looked upon Dusky Darrell as their leader, and they awaited his commands. He gave them with the coolness and clear judgment of an old general, accepting his position without a word, knowing that he was the most competent person in the party to fill it.

There were thirty-two men of the defenders, the greater number of whom were brave and self-confident, while a few, who otherwise would have held back, felt themselves endowed with courage by a single thought of the dear ones under their protection. Darrell spoke cheerfully and hopefully. The attacking party, he said, could approach only from one quarter, and, unless the party was much larger than he suspected it would be, they, with the wagons for fortifications, would undoubtedly have the advantage. The men were stationed at regular intervals along the line of wagons, all guns heavily charged and freshly primed. It was decided that, when Darrell gave the order, one-half of them should discharge their pieces, the other half reserving their fire until the effect of the first was noted, and the second command given. After that they were to load and fire as rapidly as possible, without further orders.

When all preparations were finished, Darrell went out to see if the foe were coming.

In a few minutes he came hurrying back, and bounded into the area with flashing eyes.

"What is it?" inquired Adolphus, who knew in an instant that his friend had made a discovery.

"They're comin'," was the brief reply.

"Who's coming?"

"Injuns!"

The excitement was intense now. There had been secret hopes that they would not be attacked that night, but the trapper's words dashed every hope, and warned the emigrants that they must fight or die. There was a compressing of lips, a flashing of eyes, a steadying of nerves, and in a moment every heart seemed steeled, and every face wore a look of dogged determination. Anxious glances were shot at the group of women and children, but the anxiety in them was hidden as much as possible. Those were brave souls which resolved then and there that no violent hands should touch the helpless ones looking to them for protection, until their own bodies were trampled under foot.

Darrell said he had not been able to determine the number of their enemies, precisely, but he significantly added that the band was not a smaller one than "he'd looked for."

"They war comin' slow when I see'd 'em," he continued, "so as to git as clus' to the camp as possible 'thout wakin' us up. I war jist near nough to see as they were hossmen, but I'm sart'in they're reds. They'll be onto us 'fore long. Hist! Look!"

Every tongue was silent, and every eye and ear on the alert.

While speaking, the quick-sighted detective detected a form—a single form, dim and shadowy, but evidently that of a man—out upon the prairie, at a little distance from the encampment. It was in motion; that was obvious at first sight. A second look showed that it was approaching—and approaching with the bold, free step, and cool assurance of one who feels no cause for fear. Darrell ordered every one to lie close to the ground and maintain a strict silence. The order was promptly obeyed; even the children gave vent to no sound, except that occasioned by their husky breathing; and the stillness of the grave brooded over the camp.

The lone individual came steadily on, until within a few yards of the wagons. Then he stopped, and inclined his head as if listening. He spent about a minute in this attitude, when, seeming satisfied that all was well, he put his fingers to his mouth and gave vent to a soft, tremulous whistle. It was a singular sort of a whistle, low but penetrating, such as may be heard—especially on an open prairie, in the dead of night—fully as well at the distance of a half-mile as at a dozen feet.

But he had no sooner given the signal than he was seized by a pair of strong hands and hurled violently to the earth! Sinewy fingers clutched his throat—a rough palm was pressed tightly over his mouth, until a gag was slipped between his teeth—and in this manner, unable to utter a sound, he was dragged into the inclosure a helpless prisoner.

It was Dusky Darrell who had captured the prowler.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOUR OF PERIL.

"Be still, you wolf-cub!" commanded Darrell, as he threw his prisoner on the ground, among the astonished emigrants, and placed one heavy foot upon his breast. "Be still, or I'll smash yer pictur' in the flint of a skunk's tail, you devil's imp!"

"Who is he?" asked Adolphus; and several others reiterated the question.

"Who is he?" repeated the trapper. "Jist take a squint at him, and I'll sw'ar you won't ax ag'in. Yer know him as well as I."

He stepped back to give them a better view. They bent over the prostrate man, hastily scrutinized his face, and then started back with various expressions of surprise.

"Nim Dedzel!" exclaimed a dozen in a breath.

"Yas, it's Nim Dedzel," coolly remarked Darrell.

"Why, I thought it was an Indian," said Mr. Weller.

"Waghl! he's worse nor an Injun, or I'll knock under!"

"I think you are too hasty, my friend," said a lank individual, stepping forth with an important air. "What right had you to capture this gentleman, and gag him in this cruel manner? He had simply strolled away a short distance, and was returning. What can you prove against him?"

"Were not his actions calculated to excite suspicion?" answered Jack Weller. "Did he not stop outside and whistle, in a manner that showed plainly he was signaling to somebody? The result of that signal is yet to be seen, and in all likelihood—"

"The result of that ar signal may be seen now," interrupted Darrell. "Look out yender, if yer wants to see it."

He was pointing toward the prairie.

All eyes were turned in that direction, and a black, shapeless mass was seen moving slowly across the plain, like a storm-cloud low down in the horizon. It was just discernible to the naked eye, and what it was composed of could not be determined. Every one instinctively

guessed the truth, however, and was prepared to hear the whispered declaration of Darrell:

"That 'ar's the attackin' party, sure's shootin', and it's b'ariu' down on us, too. Don't make any more noise than you kin. Hyur, two or three of you fellers help me tie this cuss's hands and feet, and the chap as takes that gag out of his mouth will git one put in his'n. Yer mought as well b'ar that in mind, kumrid," he added, addressing the lank individual, who had objected to the treatment imposed upon the guide.

Dedzel was bound securely, hand and foot. He looked the fierce hatred, disappointment, and fear he could not express in words, and was tauntingly laughed at by his captors. They threw him out of their way, in a manner more expeditious than gentle, and left him lying on the bank of the creek, where he amused himself by trying to push the gag from his mouth with his tongue.

In another minute every man was at his post, ready for action, and every mother, with her little ones gathered round her, awaited the onset with silent dread.

In an instant the plain was covered with flying horsemen, while from fifty savage throats burst a yell, wild and hideous, evidently intended to paralyze the whites as it aroused them from their slumbers. Every one knew that cry. It was the war-whoop of the Indians. And there was one in the party, at least—Dusky Darrell—who knew, from that cry, that the assailants were Cheyennes.

All at once the clear, stentorian voice of Dusky Darrell rung out:

"On the right, thar! Steady—fire!"

A sheet of flame flashed out in the darkness, like a glare of lightning—there was a crash equal to the report of a cannon—and sixteen rifles were emptied in the face of the foe.

Then there was dire confusion among the Indians. The exultant battle-cry was changed to howls of pain, rage and disappointment. There was a tumultuous pounding of hoofs; frightened steeds became ungovernable, and dashed madly hither and thither, while a number of riderless ones went careering across the prairie with terrific speed. Death-shrieks, and groans of agony mingled with fierce mandates and hoarse shouts of anger; and more than one of the defenders fancied they heard, several times, the voice of a white man rising above those of the savages.

In a minute the enemy had rallied, and once more, with appalling yells, the dusky band bore down upon the whites.

Then came Darrell's second command, firm and distinct:

"Now—you on the left—fire!"

The remaining sixteen rifles, reserved for this moment, were discharged with deadly effect, and again there was destruction and confusion among the Cheyennes. By this time many of those who had fired the first volley had reloaded their pieces, and now they began to shoot as rapidly as they could load and unload.

The Indians were furious with surprise and rage, and a terrible din was created. Being now close upon the wagons, they fired a number of random shots, though it is scarcely possible that they saw the persons shot at. There was a

plunging and snorting of maddened horses—a thundering of hoofs on the ground—unearthly screaming, groaning and yelling—cheer upon cheer from the whites, and a rapid cracking of rifles.

In a moment after the savages outside the inclosure left off firing, and with one last wrathful yell dashed away as fast as their frightened animals could carry them. And then rose a long, lusty cheer from many lusty pair of lungs, followed by a chorus of thanksgiving to God for the merciful deliverance. The danger was over—the assailants had fled in a panic—and the grateful emigrants were saved.

The gag was now removed from Nim Dedzel's mouth, since his dusky allies were far beyond the reach of his voice, but as it was deemed too much trouble at present to guard him, the cords were allowed to remain upon his ankles and wrists.

The fight took place shortly after midnight. About an hour after it ended, some one made the discovery that one of the party was missing. That was no other than Adolphus Perkins. He had not been seen since the fight, and no one could tell what had become of him. He was gone—missing—and had left no trace by which his whereabouts could be determined. Jack Weller testified, that when the approach of the attacking party had first been discovered, he and Adolphus had taken their positions side by side, but immediately after the first volley had been fired he had disappeared.

Julia Weller then remembered, that while she and Rosa Brown were standing on the bank of the stream, locked in each other's arms, Perkins had rushed by them with a smoking gun in his hand, and had shouted good-by to them as he passed. They had supposed he was jesting, however, and had not entertained a suspicion that he was really leaving.

Further investigations were made, and it was discovered that his horse was also gone, which was refutatory to the general opinion that the missing man had been shot while standing near the creek, and had fallen into the water. It was now unanimously conceded, that after firing one shot at the enemy, he had mounted his horse and fled.

Dusky Darrell knew Adolphus Perkins better than any one else in the party, and although he was wise enough to keep his own counsel, he was secretly assured that nothing but cowardice had taken his young friend away.

So, unwilling to wait till the light of day should favor him, he stole away from his companions, and went out among the bodies of the slain Cheyennes to look for that of our hero, praying, nevertheless, that it could not be found there.

While moving slowly about, the trapper's mind was suddenly diverted from the search by the sight of something he had not before seen. It was a horse, standing directly in front of him, distinctly outlined against the distant sky. With his eyes bent upon the ground, he had not seen it until within a few yards of, where it stood. The animal made no noise whatever, but maintained a solemn silence, as if he were standing guard over the corpses lying around him. It could be seen that a saddle was on his

back. This led Darrell to believe that it was not the property of an Indian, but that of a white man. In all probability it was Adolphus Perkins's horse, and that unfortunate individual was lying on the ground, dead. It was a horrible thought, and Darrell was on the eve of moving forward to investigate, when his steps were arrested by the voice of a man—a low, guarded voice, evidently proceeding from a dark, crouching form on the ground at the horse's feet.

"Hello, Dedzel! Is that you?"

Darrell gave a tremendous start, and then stood perfectly still, calm and collected in an instant. It was not the surprise of being unexpectedly addressed that caused him to start, but the fact that the voice and the words were familiar to him. On that memorable night, when he had followed Nim Dedzel to the oak grove, and had heard the significant colloquy between him and the unseen stranger—then and there it was he had heard that same question, uttered in a voice so closely resembling this one, that he could only conclude they belonged to one and the same person. While such thoughts were flashing through his mind, he stood gazing silently at the crouching figure before him.

"It is you, Dedzel?" asked the stranger again.

The detective did not hesitate longer. His mind was made up the next second, and he gruffly replied:

"Sart'inly it's me. Who are you?"

"Bah! you know me?—Buck Zigler?"

"No! 'tain't Buck?"

"Isn't it? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Sh! not so loud—they'll hear you from the camp. Bufflers! what you doin' hyur? Ain't hurt, be you?"

"Lord, no. Went away with the Cheyennes; came back alone, to see whether you got through safe or not. See here, Dedzel, I don't understand it at all. How did you make such an awkward mistake?"

"Wal, I did make 'bout the biggest blunder of my life, that's sart'in, but I'm powerful glad it's no wuss."

"How did it happen?"

"Jist in this yer' way. Yousee I thought they was all asleep, every mother's son on 'em, but I hope I may be shot if they warn't shammin', and jist as wide awake as you are now! That chap as they call Dusky Darrell, I reckon he smelt a mice, and found out somehow that the Injuns war goin' to 'tack 'em, 'cause he wouldn't let any of 'em go to sleep."

"Then why did you give the signal for us to advance when you went back to the camp?"

"'Cause the cussed snakes kept so still that I was green enough to think they war asleep. I didn't find out the truth till it war too late. I *did* give you the signal to retreat, but at the same second the reds give a screech, and 'tain't no wonder you didn't hear it."

"Do the pale-faces suspicion you?"

"I think they does, though I can't say fur sart'in. They axed me who I was whistlin' to, when I give you the signal to advance, and I told 'em I was tryin' to wake them up and put 'em on tha'r guard, 'thout lettin' the Injuns know it. The reds is sorter mad, ain't they?"

"Mad! I should say they were. They blame

you fur the destruction of their brethren, and are impatient to get their hands upon you."

"Bufflers! they wouldn't kill me?"

"They would tear you limb from limb."

"It would be best for me to steer clear of them then."

"For the present, yes. But what makes you talk so curious, Dedzel? Your voice isn't natural."

In the beginning Dusky Darrell had imitated the voice of the guide so skillfully, that there was no danger of the fraud being detected, but the words of his companion reminded him that he was growing careless. But putting on a bold front, he coolly rejoined:

"Don't know what's the matter, less I've ketched cold, and I didn't think 'twur possible fur this beaver to do that. Hel! hel! hel! Reckon thar ain't no use tryin' to git the reds to make another attack?"

"None at all. They won't do it."

"Then what in creation will we do?"

"I'll tell you—we'll resort to another method. You keep your position as guide, and I will continue to dog the caravan. When we reach the mountains we will manage to *steal* the gold, without massacreing the emigrants, some very dark night. Do you agree to that?"

"Yas, in course."

"Then look out for the Wild Horseman, day after day."

Like a flash the crouching figure leaped up, and bounded upon the horse's back. The next instant he was off like a rocket in the darkness, riding across the prairie at a terrific rate.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RACE, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

THE stranger's sudden departure surprised Darrell not a little; and not only that, but it was also a sore disappointment to him.

Darrell proved a shrewd detective, talking to the fellow and keeping up the conversation, for the purpose of getting what might be learned in that way, and to keep the villain's mind occupied while he watched his chance to pounce upon him and pinion his limbs. It had been his intention to capture the unknown, and he had scarcely had a thought of failing; but, of course, the possibility of such an abrupt and unlooked-for leave-taking had not occurred to him. Before he could divine his purpose the man was in his saddle and away, and before his trusty rifle could cover the receding form, it was too nearly swallowed up in the darkness to admit of any certainty in the result had he fired. But he did not.

"Go, you varmint," he growled, as he lowered the hammer of his rifle; "yer time hain't come yit, that's plain as the nose on a man's face, but if it don't come 'fore many days are gone, Dusk Darrell misses his guess. It's cl'ar to me now, that this chap as calls hisself Buck Zigler, ar the same chap as the whites call the Wild Horse man, and he and Dedzel are on mighty good terms. Tharfore this ain't the last we'll see of him, that's swore to."

Unable to discover the slightest trace of Adolphus Perkins, Darrell rejoined the emigrants, and told them how he had personated

Nim Dedzel in the dark, and what he had learned thereby.

All were more or less surprised to hear that the Wild Horseman was the accomplice of Nim Dedzel, instead of the harmless maniac they had thought him, and a score of men swore, over the dead bodies of their fallen comrades, that, if he continued to dog the caravan, he should share the punishment in store for Dedzel. In all probability the guide would have been killed on the spot, but for the interference of Darrell, who said the fellow's time had not come yet, though he should certainly receive his just deserts before long.

Dusky Darrell—who, by unanimous agreement, had been installed in Nim Dedzel's position as guide—said it were better to remain where they were during the remainder of that day and the coming night. In that case they would be well prepared to resume their journey on the following morning. None objected to this, for not a few believed the attack of the Cheyennes would be repeated when darkness came again, and they could not hope to find another point so convenient for defense as that they now held.

Adolphus Perkins was another consideration. By remaining on Devil's Creek—as Dedzel called the stream on which they were encamped—they would be giving the missing man an opportunity to rejoin them, on the event of his still being alive. Now, as he recalled his interview with the stranger, Buck Zigler, Darrell regretted exceedingly that he had not been thoughtful enough to inquire whether or not Adolphus was captive among the Indians. He thought, however, that Zigler would have been very likely to mention it, without waiting to be asked, if such were the case.

That night nobody retired early, and when they did, many of them were so uneasy that they did not fall asleep until a late hour. Darrell stationed six guards around the camp, who were to be relieved by as many more at a certain hour of the night. This he did more to satisfy the others than because he deemed the precaution necessary, for he did not expect to be again molested by the savages.

The information he had drawn from Buck Zigler convinced him that if they were again disturbed it would not be by the band that had attacked them on the preceding night. Nevertheless, there was nothing preposterous in the reflection that Indians from another tribe might fall upon them, and after all there was no safety in sleeping unguarded.

It was near the hour of three in the morning. Stillness deep and impressive brooded over the campment. The huge wagons, with their white canvas tilts, loomed up in the darkness as an impassable barrier, inclosing the sleepers within the circle; and the half-dozen sentinels paced at intervals round the space inclosed, some leaning against the wagons, quietly smoking, while others walked slowly backward and forward. Up to this hour the night had passed peacefully away, no incident disturbing its tranquillity, no signs of danger being detected by the quick eye and ears on the alert.

Now, however, at the very moment when all thoughts of such a thing were relinquished, the sharp ring of a horse's hoofs sounded upon the

hard turf at a little distance from the camp. In an instant every sentinel was listening intently, and peering sharply through the intervening gloom toward the spot whence the sound proceeded. Nothing could as yet be seen. The hoof-strokes were not those of a galloping horse, but one that was moving at a brisk, steady walk. The sentinels stood silently at their posts, none of them turning aside to speak to his neighbor; for it was plain, that whether friend or enemy, there was but one person coming, and that there was no cause for alarm.

Presently the solitary rider came in sight. First the head and shoulders of a man gradually rose out of the darkness, and became distinctly outlined against the distant gray sky. Then the horse's head also appeared.

"Halt!" cried the nearest sentinel. "Who goes there?"

In obedience to the stern command the intruder drew rein, and his animal stood still. But he did not answer a word. Sitting in his saddle as silent and motionless as a graven image, he seemed contemplating the obscure scene before him in speechless wonder.

"By the Lord Harry!" yelled one of the guards, hurrying to the spot. "It's the *Wild Horseman*!"

"The Wild Horseman!" shouted another.

"Down with him! Shoot him! Don't let him escape!"

The last exclamations were uttered just at the moment that the strange rider wheeled around with the quickness of lightning, and dashed away at a furious rate in the direction from which he had come.

"Shoot him! Quick!" cried several voices.

Three rifles were discharged almost simultaneously at the flying stranger. But all without effect.

At that juncture another horseman swept by the spot where the six guards were grouped together, and dashed madly out upon the plain in the tracks of the first one, leaning forward almost to his animal's neck, and gazing ahead with blazing eyes!

It was Dusky Darrell. He had been lying awake and had heard the nocturnal wanderer. He was listening when the guard accosted the new-comer, and shortly afterward the cry that it was the Wild Horseman thrilled him through and through like an electric shock.

Quick as thought he had leaped to his feet, and snatched up his rifle. Without waiting to hear more he had then run to the spot where his steed was standing, and bounding upon his back with the agility of a monkey—had given him the word "go!" and a few seconds later the camp was behind him, and he was hotly pressing the stranger who had ridden so boldly up to the wagons.

Now began a race of a most exciting nature. The broad prairie stretched out before them as level as a floor, seeming to invite an endless run, though the darkness that hung over all was sufficient to hide whatever obstacles might have lain in their way. Obviously the retreating man was now riding for dear life, as the fast-clattering hoof-strokes told that he was putting his horse to the test. It was a mad, impetuous ride.

Dusky Darrell allowed the reins to lie un-

touched, while he held his rifle in both hands. The faithful black charger that bore him wanted no guiding, and needed no spur. It was not his first race by many, and with his intelligent eye on the dark figure in front, he stretched his beautiful limbs to the task, as if he took pride in exhibiting his extraordinary fleetness of foot.

Before the first mile was fairly completed, it could be seen that the trapper was steadily gaining ground. This surprised even the trapper himself, for, without forgetting that his own good steed had never been outdone in a match of speed, he had nevertheless made a miscalculation at starting. What he had seen of the Wild Horseman had led him to believe that he had a swift traveler to contend with. He had often watched the fellow as he circled around the caravan, and his own eyes had given evidence that there was fleetness in the long, clean limbs of the horse, that was seldom excelled. Naturally, then, he had not once thought of lessening the distance between them so soon.

A thought struck him. Probably it was not the Wild Horseman, after all. The guards might have been mistaken. But, if not, who could it be? That he was not an Indian the trapper would have taken his oath. Another thought struck him. It was the Wild Horseman, and the animal's failing speed was caused either by fast traveling, or by a ruse of the rider, who in this manner was encouraging his pursuer on to an Indian ambush. The former conjecture became a settled one—the latter was given up as an improbability.

Thoughts such as these flashed through Darrell's mind, but at the same time he passed over another mile without abating a jot of the rate at which he was going. With both hands clutching the gun in front—with his body bent forward in an attitude more congruous than graceful—with his piercing orbs flashing fire at every bound of the spirited brute beneath him—with a settled determination showing itself in his sturdy, brown face—thus, like a meteor, he darted across the level prairie, with his whole soul in the exciting chase.

The object of his pursuit was in easy rifle-range, and Darrell could have brought him to the earth at any moment, if he had felt so inclined; but that was not his purpose. It was his desire to capture the miscreant, take him back to camp alive, and place him with his fellow-conspirator, Nim Dedzel.

On they thundered, pell-mell, headlong, helter-skelter—on, on, as swiftly as swallows on the wing.

After an hour of hard riding, Darrell saw that the race was almost at an end, and a grim smile troubled the beard about his mouth. He was close upon the retreating horseman.

All at once the latter turned abruptly to the left, and galloped away at right angles with the course he had been pursuing. Darrell instantly drew rein, and came to a sudden halt. Quickly his gun leaped to his shoulder, and was just as quickly aimed. The trigger fell—there was a flash in the darkness—a report keen and startling—and the galloping horse and his rider came thundering to the earth.

The trapper gave vent to a low chuckle, and rode forward slowly. He had not shot the man, but the horse,

Nevertheless, when he came to the spot where they had fallen, one was lying as motionless as the other. The man appeared to have no more life in him than the horse, and the horse was stone-dead. They were lying several yards apart.

Supposing the fellow was merely stunned, Darrell dismounted and approached him. Bending down he seized him by the shoulder, and shook him a little. The effect was startling in the extreme. The stranger turned over, with a groan, and testily exclaimed:

"Hagnation! why can't you let a man alone? I'm deader than any door-nail in the county! I'm shot! Haven't you humanity enough to let my remains rest in peace?"

Dusky Darrell drew back, and stared at the prostrate man in blank amazement. The next instant he clapped his hands on his sides, and burst into such a hearty fit of laughter that his whole frame shook, as if he was seized with the ague.

"Hal hal hal hal hal! I hope I may be smashed flatter'n a beaver's tail if 'tain't Spider!" he ejaculated. "Wal, that beats my time all holler. I knock under. What you layin' thar fur, youngster? You ain't shot, any more'n I am."

Darrell's unrestrained merriment seemed to astonish the fallen man exceedingly. He rose to a sitting posture (forgetting, evidently, that he was dead) and stared at the old trapper like one just waking from a dream.

"Git up, Spider. Don't you know me?"

"Thunderation! how should I know you? I'm not acquainted with everybody. Besides, I'm not sure whether this is Heaven or the infernal regions!"

Adolphus Perkins—for it was no other—passed his hand across his forehead two or three times, and looked about with a bewildered air.

Darrell shook with laughter again.

"You're still on 'arth, Spider," he said, "and ain't likely to be anywhar else fur some time."

"Good Lord! that's Dusky Darrell talking to me," exclaimed Adolphus, rising to his feet apparently without much effort.

"Sart'in it is," was the quiet reply. "Who did you think it was?"

"Why, I'll be hanged if I didn't think you were an Indian!"

"And hyur's as thought you was the Wild Hossman."

"Hal hal hal!" laughed Adolphus, who was immediately himself again; "this is a nice go, isn't it? But, gracious goodness!" he added, growing serious again, and shrugging his shoulders, as he bestowed a glance on his dead horse; "there was no occasion whatever to shoot at me."

"I shot at the animile, not at you." But you may jist consider yourself all-fired lucky to escape as slick as you did, fur I war purty like to draw bead on you instead of the hoss."

The exquisite shuddered, and began to feel himself all over, to make sure that he was not really shot.

"I didn't think of yer bein' anybody else but that 'ar Buck Zigler," continued the trapper, "and I had a notion two or three times of

knockin' you out of your saddle, jist to see you drop."

"Gracious goodness!"

It could be seen, even in the darkness, that Adolphus turned pale.

"It 'u'd 'a' been yer own fault if I had settled your hash," the hunter went on, with stern emphasis, "'cause if it hadn't been fur yer blasted cowardice thar'd been no danger of sich a thing. Arter all, I don't know but I ought to have plugged yer confounded noddle."

"Why, demmit! that would have been an awful shabby trick."

"Bah! you'd no bizness to run from yer friends."

"How should I know that you were a friend? When I approached the camp, you all set up such a yell that I at once concluded the whites were all killed, and the caravan captured by Indians. There was not enough hospitality extended to me; so I retired."

"You war foolish fur leavin' the camp in the fu'st place."

Adolphus looked confused.

"Well—I—yes, I guess I was," he stammered; "but I really did not think so at the time."

"You thought then it war the easiest way to save yer life?"

"There is just where you are mistaken, my friend. I didn't go for that purpose. When we fired the first volley, I killed an Indian who had a fine, gold-mounted rifle in his possession, and I thought it worth risking my life to procure. So I mounted my horse, and dashed out of the inclosure after the prize. But I was headed off by about a hundred savages, and I was compelled to fly for my life. As luck would have it, I managed to elude the red devils—"

"Wagh!" interrupted the trapper, "you needn't carry that story any further, unless you kin sprinkle a little truth in it as yer goes along. Anybody 'u'd know you couldn't see a gold-mounted shooter in the Injun's hands, when it war so blasted dark you could skeercely see the Injun hisself. Besides that, you're the last person as would risk his life to git hold of sich a prize, and you may tell a straighter tale than that, or none."

"If you know the story better than I, tell it," said Perkins, doggedly.

"As yer likes," was the imperturbable rejoinder. "When the first volley was fired the Injuns raised such a hubbub that you thought we's all doomed, so you concluded to save yer own life by cuttin' sticks. That's why you went, and it's a thousand wonders you didn't lose yer ha'r by it."

"Well," said Perkins, after some hesitation, "you needn't repeat that story to the fellows in camp. I should not like to have the Wellers hear it."

"I sha'n't tell any one, though all on 'em ought to know it. I'm e'ena'most out of patience with you, Spider. But we hain't got time to stand hyar palaverin'. I've an idee my presence is needed in camp, and I reckon we'd better be gittin' back thar."

"Just what I was thinking," said Adolphus, glad to change the subject. "I haven't been out of the saddle since I left you, nor have I had a mouthful of food. As a natural con-

sequence, I am tired and hungry. But my horse is dead," he added. "I will have to walk."

"Mine will carry both of us," said Darrell. "Git on behind the saddle. Thar was two or three Injun hosses captured arter the fight. You kin have yer choice out of them to pay for yourn."

They both mounted the trapper's steed, and turned his head in the direction of the encampment.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONDITIONAL "YES."

It was broad daylight when the two men reached Devil's Creek, and rode into the inclosure, amid the cheers of the emigrants.

Dusky Darrell quietly remarked that the Wild Horseman had given him the slip, but that the chase was a lucky one after all, since he had fallen in with Perkins who was lost upon the prairie. The latter was cordially greeted, and when he casually mentioned that he had eaten nothing since they saw him last, Jack Weller made haste to mention that his sister and Rosa Brown had prepared a very palatable breakfast, in the discussion of which he must join them.

Of course he did not refuse, for besides being hungry he had been burning to see Julia Weller, from whom, it seemed to him, he had been separated an age. Imagine, then, his discomfiture when, on finding himself once more face to face with the beautiful object of his adoration, she merely bowed to him with cold politeness, and turned away. He was stunned. He could not guess what had so changed her.

Even Rosa Brown, usually so shy, manifested much more pleasure at seeing him again than did Julia, from whom he had expected so much. No one appeared to notice the change in her but himself. He not only noticed, but felt it keenly; and began to wonder who his rival was. He joined the family at breakfast, but he did not relish the food he ate. Long as he had fasted, his appetite was gone.

Julia was lively as ever, and chatted gayly with the other members of the party, but whenever he spoke she was silent. Evidently, from some cause or other, she had formed an aversion to him, and that during his absence. Who was the backbiter? Who had taken the opportunity to vilify him when he was not present to defend himself? He resolved to find out before the lapse of twenty-four hours, and, unless immediate reparation was made, there would certainly be a quantity of blood shed in that vicinity!

Shortly after breakfast was over the camp broke up; everything about it was in motion; the wagons moved forward in a line, and Devil's Creek was left in the rear. Under the supervision of the new guide everything was properly conducted, and the emigrant train crept on over the illimitable plain toward the distant "diggings." The Rocky Mountain Range was in sight. Far away, and still low down in the horizon, the dim, bluish peaks could be seen, like a pile of clouds in the sky, reaching away to the north and south.

That evening, when the bustle and confusion of going into camp had subsided, Adolphus determined to address Julia on the subject which

was causing him so much mental pain. She had spoken to him but two or three times during the day, and even then had merely answered some pointed inquiry he had put to her. He made up his mind that this thing had gone about far enough, and that he must learn the cause of her very singular conduct toward him before retiring.

As soon as a suitable opportunity offered, he approached the girl and spoke to her in a low tone.

"Miss Weller, will you do me the honor of walking with me for a few minutes, out upon the prairie?"

"Excuse me," she replied, calmly. "I shall not walk this evening."

And she made as if she would leave him.

"Stay one moment," said Adolphus, and there was something in his quiet, steady voice that held her to the spot. "I have requested the honor of your company for a few minutes—not for the simple enjoyment of that honor, but for a purpose. I have something of importance to say to you."

"Could you not say it here as well?"

"No."

"Then you will have to postpone it."

Adolphus bit his lip, and toyed nervously with his watch-chain. But when he spoke again his voice was firm and resolute.

"Miss Weller," said he, "what I have to say must be said at one time or another, and a postponement would be an inconvenience to me, besides doing you no good. Begging your pardon, I have decided irrevocably that you shall hear me on this matter of importance to-night. If you absolutely refuse to let me take you aside from all these people, I will speak *here*, where I am likely to be overheard by others; but you will certainly regret, before I am through, that my simple request was not complied with. I leave it to your good sense to choose between the two alternatives."

Julia was surprised. She looked at him as if she would read his thoughts. His face was calm and impenetrable. After some hesitation, though even then appearing undecided, she said, briefly:

"I will go with you."

"Thank you," he murmured.

And together they walked slowly away—beyond the circle of wagons, out upon the open prairie—just as though they were strolling for pleasure.

At a short distance from the encampment they paused, and began to walk backward and forward in a space of some yards. Then, at a look from his fair companion, Adolphus began:

"You have probably conjectured ere this, Miss Weller, that my object in bringing you hither is to request of you an explanation—"

He paused, and cleared his throat.

"An explanation—" repeated the girl, in a manner that invited him to proceed.

"Previous to the event of our bloody conflict with the Cheyennes," pursued our hero, "you were vastly different from your present self. You did not shun me then as now; you did not seem cold and haughty; you treated me with the unreserved familiarity of a friend. The

change was forced upon my notice immediately after my return this morning."

"Well?" she returned, coldly.

Adolphus bit his lips again, and grew more nervous.

"Will you explain why this is so?" he asked.

"Remember we can not always account for the little changes others may presume to discover in us."

"But I am positive—begging your pardon—that you are able to assign a cause for the change I have presumed to discover in you."

"Thank you for reminding me of my mistake," said she, with a bow.

Undaunted, Adolphus proceeded.

"Has some one been assailing my character in my absence? That is, have I an enemy in camp who has sought to alienate us by slandering me while my back was turned?"

"No."

"If so, I shall take upon myself the responsibility of shooting him so full of holes that he won't make a decent sieve!"

"I said, No."

"So you did; excuse me. But if that isn't the right explanation, I am unable to guess the cause of your singular dislike for me. Won't you tell me? I certainly have a right to know."

"Have I said that I dislike you?"

"Yes."

"You mistake, sir—"

"By your actions you have said it a dozen times."

Julia was silent. Adolphus stopped in his walk, folded his arms over his breast, and turned toward her.

"I see you are determined to tell me nothing," he said, and his voice shook a little now. "I see you are resolute, and I will urge you no further, though you certainly can not blame me for wishing to know how I have forfeited the esteem of one whose good will is prized above that of all others."

She raised her glorious eyes to his, and there was undisguised pity in the look she gave him then. She hesitated and stammered, but only for a moment. Quickly recovering her self-possession, she spoke frankly and briefly in answer:

"Forgive me, sir—I do not blame you for making the inquiries, but, believe me, to answer them would be to hurt your feelings unnecessarily, without doing the least good. I do not hate you—don't think that. I have acted rudely to-day, perhaps; I will try and be more friendly hereafter, for I truly believe, aside from one failing, you merit the esteem of more worthy persons than I."

"'Aside from one failing,'" repeated the young man. "May I ask what that failing is?"

"Please don't. If this particular foible were not the only grievous one you have shown, I could mention it to you without compunction, but since you have appeared a man in every other respect, I would forbear. Others, very likely, would not view this in the serious light that I do, but I have always felt a singular loathing for the weakness in question, regarding it as unpardonable in a man, and quite contemptible even in a woman. Therefore, if I deem you worthy of

contempt, it is all because of that disgraceful weakness you possess."

Adolphus was astonished. He tried to consider.

"Do tell me to what you allude," he pleaded, unable to conjecture. "If I but knew the nature of this habit, or foible, of which you speak, I would cast it from me without delay."

"I fear not," she returned, shaking her head.

"Would I not? Try me and see. Why, bless you, there is nothing in the wide world I would not do—or attempt to do—for your sake. Willingly would I lay down my life at your feet, if by that means I could win back your respect for me. I would do anything for you, Julia."

"For me?"

Her eyes sought the ground, and a blush mantled her cheeks.

Adolphus instantly found himself ungovernable.

"Julia," he cried, passionately, seizing both of her hands and holding them tightly, "dear, dear Julia, I see you have guessed the truth. Since it can no longer be concealed I may as well confess. Darling, I love you—love you with a strong, fervent adoration which language of mine cannot express. I had thought my love was encouraged—had dared to hope that it was even reciprocated—but to-day I have evidently less favor in your sight than at the moment of our first meeting. Julia, speak to me. Can you not overlook this fault of which you speak, and be mine forever? Or tell me what it is, that I may attempt rectification. Don't turn me away without an explanation. Try to bear with me. I worship you! I cannot—oh! I cannot live without you!"

She hesitated, and was silent. His passionate outburst was entirely unexpected, as her confusion showed, and the sudden avowal so bewildered her that she could not frame an answer at once.

With a determined effort she succeeded in mastering her emotion, and with comparative calmness said:

"Sir, this was so unlooked-for; I cannot answer now."

"You can! You must!" cried Adolphus. "I cannot endure the suspense. You certainly know whether you love me or not. Oh, tell me that you will be mine! Tell me, even, that I may hope."

She looked up at him now, and in the dim light it could be seen that she had resolved to hide the truth no longer.

"Mr. Perkins," said she, gently but firmly, "as you will have me say it, I can never consent to be the wife of a—a—"

"A what?" he demanded.

"A coward!"

Adolphus took a step backward, and stared at her. He understood it all now, and was overwhelmed with confusion.

"Cowardice, then, is the despicable weakness you have discovered in me?" he stammered, looking very foolish indeed.

"It is," she replied.

"And do you really think I'm a—a—ahem!—a coward?"

"I am certain of it, sir. If you were not, it

doesn't stand to reason that you would have fled on the night of the attack."

"Then you concluded that my flight was caused by fear?"

"As a matter of course. There are many who believe you had pardonable reasons for leaving when you did—reasons that you do not care to mention—but I cannot be so convinced."

"And why?"

"Because, when you rushed by the spot where Rosa and I were standing, any one might have seen that you were frightened half-out of your wits. Your eyes were wild, and terror was written on every lineament of your face. Indeed, I don't like to say it to you, but you cannot censure me after driving me to it."

"It is a most contemptible weakness, I admit," said Adolphus. "I have always been ashamed of it, but never so much as now. Tell me, darling, if I give you my word of honor as a gentleman that I will never act the coward again so long as I live, will you, in return, promise to be my wife?"

Julia blushed again, and lunged her head.

"I have never thought of such a thing."

"But I wish you to think of it now," he replied.

"Before I answer, tell me this: are you willing to *prove* instead of *promise*, that you will cast off this unmanly timidity?"

"Willing? Just tell me how I can prove it, and I'll mighty soon show you whether I'm willing or not."

"Then, on one condition, I will consent to your proposal."

"Name the condition."

"Will you capture the Wild Horseman?"

Adolphus staggered back as if she had struck him.

"Capture him," she continued, in her calm, clear accents, "and bring him prisoner to the camp. If you do that my hand is yours."

He looked at her as if he were inclined to question her sanity. She said no more, but waited for him to speak. He could not regard it as a jest. She meant it, certainly.

They walked back to the encampment, neither of them uttering a word until they were within the inclosure. Then they parted. He bade her good-night quite cheerfully, kissed her hand in a very lover-like manner, murmured, "My own darling!" and left her standing there alone under the star-studded sky. He was still a little pale as he walked away, but a quiet, resolute look was stamped upon his face, which no person ever before had seen there.

Dusky Darrell was standing with his back toward him, enjoying his evening pipe.

"Darrell, I'll be one of the watchers to-night," he said, quite authoritatively.

"You?" exclaimed Darrell; "ain't you afeard a red-skin'll sneak on yer? If yer wants to watch to-night, Spider, yer kin stand guard over that wagon thar whar Nim Dedzel is covered up. What do yer say?"

"All right," was the quiet response. "Instead of being one of the sentinels I will stand guard over Dedzel." And Adolphus walked briskly away.

"Smash me if that don't sorter s'prise this beaver," muttered Darrell.

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT OF EVENTS.

ADOLPHUS PERKINS sat in the fore end of the wagon, in which the traitorous guide was confined, his rifle between his knees, and one of his favorite Havanas between his teeth. It was just midnight by his unerring chronometer, and everybody but the guards had long since retired. The half-dozen vigilant sentinels occupied places at regular intervals around the inclosure. A strong wind swept down from the distant mountains, occasionally bearing with it the shrill cry of some distant animal, and the black clouds went scudding across the sky like a fleet of phantom vessels on the sea.

Adolphus had a lantern beside him, which he held up to the opening every once in a while, as he looked to see if the prisoner was all right.

At length he tossed his cigar away, and taking up the lantern, he quietly slipped off the back of the seat, and in an instant was inside the wagon under the canvas tilt that covered it.

On a bed of straw, surrounded by boxes and barrels, lay the burly form of Nim Dedzel. He was fast asleep, and snoring loudly. He was bound hand and foot.

Thrusting his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, Adolphus drew forth a little book, from which he tore out a blank leaf, and placed it, with the book and lead-pencil, on a box at his elbow. After that, he made the light in the lantern as brilliant as possible, and set it on the floor so close to the sleeping man's face that it almost touched his nose. Then he deliberately drew the revolver from his belt, cocked it, and, with his finger on the trigger, placed the muzzle quite as close to the prisoner's face as he had placed the lantern. In this position he watched and waited, his eyes fixed upon the rugged face of the guide.

Presently the strong light did its work. At first there was a scarcely perceptible quiver of the eyelids; then the eyes slowly opened, and, dazzled by the bright glare, began to blink rapidly.

"Devil take the glimmer!" growled the man, turning his head to escape it. Then he beheld Adolphus Perkins bending over him, the revolver close to his head. He turned white, and tried to shrink away from it.

"Heavens!" he gasped, "take that ar' thing away! Who be you?"

"Silence!" commanded Adolphus, in a whisper. "I don't want to kill you. Answer me this question: Can you write?"

"Wal, kinder; nothin' to speak on."

"Did Buck Zigler ever see your writing?"

"Who?" Nim Dedzel started violently.

"Buck Zigler," repeated Adolphus. "Answer me quick! Don't stop to ask questions. Did he ever see your writing?"

"More'n once."

Adolphus drew a long breath of relief.

"See here, Dedzel," said he, in a hard, resolute tone, "I am going to untie your hands and have you write a note to Buck Zigler, at my dictation. You needn't stare; I mean precisely what I say; and the first sign of a refusal seals your doom. It will do you no good to try and get the advantage of me as soon as your hands are free, for if you attempt to harm me there

will be no chance of your escaping with your life while your feet are tied."

He laid the weapon aside as he spoke, and dextrously removed the cord that bound the captive's wrists. This accomplished, he took up the piece of blank paper and placed it on the floor in the light of the lantern. Then he put the lead-pencil in the clumsy fingers of Dedzel, took up the revolver and once more presented it at the villain's head, commanding him to write while he dictated. The latter rested himself on his left elbow, and, holding the pencil in his right hand, waited to be told what he should write. In his own characteristic style he put down each word as it fell from our hero's lips. What with his awkwardness and inexperience, he was a long time finishing the few words that were to be written, but when at last the note was completed, Perkins looked at it and was satisfied.

It was a miserable scrawl, but the words were capable of being deciphered. They ran as follows:

"Buck Zigler:—They is a Young chap in kamp as sez he kan whip you in a far fite On hoss bak and he says he is Boun fur tu chalnge you the Varry nex time you kum in site. He is a little feller and he is ofile Green and he is rite from the staitis and he thinks he is ofile smart. If you kum roun tumorry and he rides out torst you jist wate fur him and talk his chalnge. Yule kerflumix the kuss in the whisk of a skunks tale. Now i hav my reezins fur axing this and i want you to Do it. They haint no danger.
"Nimrod DeDzel."

It would be utterly impossible to describe the expression the guide's face wore as he handed this note to the dictator, but amazement was predominant. Perkins, instead of paying the least attention to the searching look bestowed upon him, coolly proceeded to retie the ruffian's hands, just as he had found them. Then, after warning Dedzel, on his life, to mention the transaction to nobody, he returned the revolver to his belt, took up the lantern and resumed his position on the outside of the tilt.

"So much done satisfactorily," said Perkins to himself, as he lighted another cigar, "but it may be weeks before a chance will offer to put it in Buck Zigler's possession. Nevertheless, be it early or late, on the day after he reads this note he becomes my prisoner, or I die by his hands! I wish he had the message to-night."

A half-hour later, as he still sat there in deep meditation, he espied the form of a man gliding swiftly along on the ground below him. It came in from the prairie, passed through the boundary and was within the inclosure. It came close to the wagon where our hero was watching. He recognized the actions of the figure.

"Hello, Darrell," he hailed; "what the blazes are you doing out at this hour of the night?"

"Hush, Spider," admonished the trapper, coming close to the wagon, and speaking in a low tone. "I don't want anybody to know it 'cept you, but I've see'd a sight." The trapper pointed toward the plain and whispered: "The Wild Horseman are right out yonder."

"The Wild Horseman!" ejaculated Perkins, almost jumping from his seat. Where is he?—how far away?"

"Only a little ways. He's hanging round tryin' to see Dedzel, I take it."

"And you didn't pop him over!"

"No; he's thar yit. I'm goin' fur to try to take that cuss a prisoner and am goin' fur the lary-at to noose him," and the trapper hurried away.

No sooner was he gone than Adolphus leaped nimbly to the ground, and glanced sharply in every direction.

"I don't like to work against you, Darrell," he muttered, "but we'll see whether the Wild Horseman is your game, yet."

He had proceeded but a short distance, after leaving the confines of the camp, when he halted suddenly. There, right in his path was a horse, and a man was on his back. He had come upon them unexpectedly. It was the Wild Horseman!

"Stop!" commanded the man in his path. "Who comes there?"

"Fly, Zigler! Quick! for your life!" Adolphus said in a low tone, as, advancing, he handed the horseman a piece of paper and then was gone.

As he fled, he listened intently, and in a moment had the satisfaction of knowing that his warning was heeded. The clatter of horses' hoofs broke upon his ears. The Wild Horseman was retreating at break-neck speed.

Hark! The keen crack of a rifle rung out upon the stillness of the night. It was Dusky Darrell's rifle. Had he shot the horseman, after all? The clatter of hoofs on the hard turf continued with unabated swiftness. Was it the steed alone, flying frantic with fear, made riderless by the discharge of that unerring gun?

Adolphus approached the camp by a circuitous course, entering it at a point nearly opposite that at which he had made his exit; informing the guard, as he passed, that he had been out for a little scout. He hurried back to his post, half-fearful now he had been detected in his act. Panting with excitement, and the exertion he had undergone, he leaped upon the seat in front of the wagon, and sat down beside his lantern.

No sooner had he done so than he saw the trapper coming. He was walking slowly, loading his rifle as he came.

Before he could enter the inclosure, Darrell was surrounded by the guards, and several others who had been awakened by the shot, overwhelming him with eager, excited inquiries. Adolphus could not hear the answers that were given, but he kept his seat, fairly trembling with impatience for the crowd to disperse. When the trapper was once more alone, our hero dropped to the ground and joined him.

"Hello, Darrell. Shot him, did you?"

"Wagh! you heern my shooter bark, I s'pose?"

"You didn't miss him, I hope?"

"Didn't do nothin' else."

"You miss?"

"Nothin' shorter; didn't hit the cuss," persisted Darrell, "'cause I didn't see him when I fired. Don't know what made the coon git in sich a blasted hurry, but jist afore I got in sight of him he put, as fast as that long-legged hoss of his kin travil. You see, I might have wiped him out when I first see'd him, but I thought I'd

just lasso the sneak and so drag him into camp for a show. Good Lord, how he did git! I mought as well 'a' shot at a streak!"

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, and the wagon-train was in motion at an early hour.

A marked change had come over Adolphus Perkins; a change that none could help but observe. He no longer seemed the lively, laughing dandy he had hitherto been, but was grave and silent, as if at last a serious thought had entered his mind. Even Jack Weller or Dusky Darrell, could draw but few words from him, and he never so much as looked Julia in the face when he came near her.

At noon the emigrants halted, as usual, for the mid-day rest and repast. The horses were unhitched, and fed at the rear end of the wagons, and every preparation made for the customary hour's halt. Smoke began to rise from a number of fires, which the men kept replenished with fuel, while the women cooked, and the air was soon laden with the savory odor of smelling meat. The day, which had dawned so gloriously, had lost none of its beauty. The sun shone unobscured from the zenith, and that, with the steady breeze, which is always felt on the plains, rendered the temperature delightful.

While nearly all of the party were engaged in the interesting duty of contributing to their appetite, a small boy jumped up and cried out, at the top of his voice:

"There he is again! Here he comes! Whoop!"

It was the Wild Horseman. He was still far away, but was approaching swiftly.

At length it was seen that he was coming much nearer than he had ever ventured before. The bold rider suddenly drew rein, and sat silently in his saddle, looking toward the camp. He made a tempting target for a skillful marksman, and more than one gun was taken up and cocked.

The stranger did not move.

Adolphus Perkins was seen to separate himself from the crowd, and walk hastily to the spot where his horse was standing. As if in a great hurry, he vaulted into the saddle. His next act was to cast his rifle to the ground; his next to examine his revolvers; then he tightened his belt, gathered up the reins, and turned the animal's head toward the Horseman!

CHAPTER XI.

THE TOURNAMENT ON THE PRAIRIE.

"Hold on, Spider!" shouted Darrell. "What you goin' to do?"

He turned half around, and pointed toward the Wild horseman.

"I'm going to capture that man!" he said, in a clear, steady voice.

Had a thunderbolt fallen from the blue sky above, it could scarcely have created more surprise. It would have been startling from any source, but Adolphus was the very last person from whom such a thing was expected. He was outwardly calm, but pale as death, and it could be seen by every one that there was no jest in the words he had uttered.

All were on their feet now, more or less amazed, alarmed and excited.

"Don't fear for me," he said, speaking loud enough for all to hear. "If I fail in this undertaking, cowardice will not be the cause. I arranged with this fellow last night to meet me in mortal combat to-day, and if he is not my prisoner in a half hour—there is but one alternative."

He waved his hand, gave his horse the spur, and rode out upon the prairie at a gentle canter.

"Mount yer animals, 'bout a dozen of yer, and see that yer weepins are in order. That young chap are in 'arnest, shure's shootin', and if the varmint proves too much for him we'll jist gallop out thar and part 'em."

Every man mounted, and all held themselves in readiness for a charge.

When within a hundred yards of his enemy, Adolphus reined in his steed, and for some minutes they sat still, looking at each other. The contrast between the two was most striking. The apprehension which the emigrants felt for *their* man, amounted almost to despair as they looked at the big, muscular, ferocious fellow with whom he had to deal. *He*, on the other hand, possessed neither great strength, powers of endurance, nor experience. There was a breathless silence, as they waited for the fight to commence.

All at once Adolphus threw up his hand as a signal. Like a shot the two horses bounded forward at the same instant. But the tactics of the combatants were entirely different. While Adolphus dashed straight ahead, as if he would ride over his opponent at full gallop, the latter, more experienced, wheeled suddenly to the left and began to sweep *around* him at headlong speed. Adolphus saw at once that his antagonist was trying to draw as many shots from him as possible, and at the same time reserve his own; so he acted accordingly, keeping his eyes on the fellow like a hawk, and holding his six-shooter in readiness.

As soon as they had passed beyond each other, both changed their course and dashed forward again, the outlaw now riding around his man in the other direction. Seeing that his plan had failed, the Wild Horseman fired the first shot.

It was quickly done, and accurately aimed, but Perkins saw what was coming in time to avoid it. Quick as lightning he dropped behind his horse, and when he rose again to the saddle he revealed the fact that he had escaped unhurt.

"It is his excellent horsemanship, rather than his fighting abilities, that saves him," observed Mr. Weller.

"He's powerful active, that's dead sart'in," said another of the men. "Thar ain't many of us in this crowd what 'u'd dodged that shot as purty as he done it."

Just then there was another report. Perkins had emptied one chamber of his revolver, but with no better success than had attended the other.

The outlaw now fired two shots in rapid succession. Despite the ducking of his head, one of the balls whistled by close to Perkins's ear; the other inflicted a slight wound in his thigh, and splintered the back of the saddle.

Now they began to circle 'round each other

dodging and maneuvering with the agility of cats, each closely watching the movements of the other.

It was a horrible sight to witness, and yet there was an awful fascination in it that held every eye enthralled. On the dark face of the Wild Horseman was a look of beastlike ferocity. Adolphus was still calm, pale and impenetrable, but there was an air about him which was *deadly*, and which his friends did not fail to observe with renewed hope.

All at once the outlaw changed his tactics. With a whoop that would have done justice to a dozen Indians, he wheeled 'round and galloped away like the wind, as if he were suddenly beset with fear, and was flying for his life. Before Adolphus could recover from his surprise, the man changed his course as quick as thought, and fired!

Adolphus dropped to the ground like a stone. But the next instant he was on his animal's back again, though his hat was off now, and the blood was streaming down over his white face from a slight wound at the roots of his hair. The villain saw that he had not missed his aim this time, and with a roar of exultation he bore down upon his young adversary with all the speed contained in the limbs of his fleet charger. But the young knight did not flinch. His heart was still firm and his hand still steady, though almost blinded by blood. Those who were watching him saw his revolver leap up to a level with his face, at a moment when they were least expecting it.

There was a puff of white smoke—a sharp report—and the outlaw and his brave steed came tumbling to the earth together!

But, it was the animal that was killed, not the man. While the former lay motionless where he had fallen, the latter sprung to his feet and glared at his enemy like a ferocious beast. He was evidently of the opinion that he had found his match in the little fellow from "the States."

Adolphus was seen to make another quick movement. Something began to whirl 'round his head in a series of circles or coils, and then it shot out into the air like a long black serpent.

"The lasso! the lasso!" yelled one of the spectators.

"Smash me if it *ain't* the lasso!" cried Darrell, speaking rapidly. "I shot Spider's critter t'other night; he's rid the Injun's hoss ever since, and thar was a lasso attached to it. Look! Hurrah!"

The noose of the lasso settled down over the neck and shoulders of the amazed and half-stunned villain. He gave a hoarse yell, and made a frantic effort to throw off the coil, but, with a quick jerk, Adolphus tightened the noose, and at the same time hurled the man violently to the ground.

He then leaped nimbly from his saddle, and ran to the spot where the fallen man lay. He was stretched out on his back, with both arms pinioned to his sides so securely that, with all his strength, he was unable to move them. Observing this, Adolphus seized the rope and passed it several times more around the arms and body of the renegade, tying it carefully. After that, he assisted him to his feet, and informed him that no good would come of further resistance on his

part; that he was a prisoner, and could make nothing else out of himself for the present.

Adolphus was master of the field. He once more mounted his horse, and rode slowly back to camp, holding the lasso which bound his captive, while the latter had no alternative but to walk quietly along behind.

Cheer upon cheer rose from the excited emigrants, as he coolly led his crestfallen prisoner into their midst. They crowded 'round him with a deafening chorus of yells.

"Hurrah for Perkins!" was the cry.

"Spider," shouted Dusky Darrell, pushing through the crowd and grasping his hand, "smash me if you ain't a *trump*! You've behaved yerself like a man—you have, by the Eternal! and hyur's as never calls you a coward ag'in!"

"Thank you, Darrell," he replied, with a triumphant gleam in his eyes. "It is a pleasure to feel that I have redeemed myself."

The Wild Horseman—or Buck Zigler, as he may now be called—stood among his enemies erect and silent. A sullen scowl was on his dark visage, as he glanced from face to face, and none of the inquiries addressed to him received the slightest answers, by word or sign. He was a tall man, muscular and well-proportioned—a perfect tower of strength and physical beauty—comparing to his captor as the lion to the squirrel. His hair streamed down his back, long, and black, and straight as an Indian's, and the character of his dress was purely savage. But he was a white man, for all that, though a few argued that there was Indian blood in his veins.

As soon as the crowd that encompassed him would permit, Adolphus rode forward, still leading his helpless charge. His searching gaze alighted upon Julia Weller, standing by herself. He leaped nimbly down from his horse's back, and stood before her; bowing low, he said:

"Julia, the Wild Horseman is here. He is your prisoner, not mine. Have I won the prize?"

She blushed and trembled. Everybody was looking at them in blank surprise. The girl recovered her self-possession, and lifting her innocent, truthful eyes to his, she gave him her hand.

"I am not the person to break a promise," she replied, frankly. "You have proved yourself a hero; I am yours from this hour."

Then the people saw instinctively how matters stood, and the air was filled again with shouts, and cheers, and congratulations. Mr. Weller stood back, staring at them in speechless wonder for awhile; then he grasped the happy lover's hand.

"My blessing on you both," he said. "Take good care of her, my boy; you have indeed won a prize, though I, her father, say it."

Our young Lochinvar had received two slight wounds, or scratches, in the fight. He now proceeded to wash the blood from these, and when they were properly dressed, he quietly made the announcement, that "Richard was himself again."

In the mean time, two or three men took charge of the prisoner. After looking about him for a while, as if in quest of somebody he couldn't find, he appeared to lose all patience, and gave vent to a fierce oath.

"Whar's Nim Dedzel?" he gruffly demanded.

Before an answer could be given, Dusky Darrell stepped in front of him and coolly surveyed him from head to foot.

"Who's that you're inquirin' arter?" he asked.

"I want to see the guide of this wagon-train," was the bullying reply.

"Wal, look at him. It's a free kentry."

"Where is he?"

"Stan'in' right afore yer twinklers."

"It's a lie! The guide's name is Nim Dedzel."

"Is it? I thought 'twas Dusky Darrell! Thar's a chap layin' on his back in that wagon yender, with his hands and feet tied, and sez *his* handle are Nim Dedzel. But he ain't the guide fur *this* party, nor hain't been since the night the Cheyennes attacked us. His treachery war diskivered afore the attack, and he's been in limbo ever since."

Buck Zigler looked frightened and perplexed. "I could not have been deceived," he cried.

"You have been, till this minute," said Darrell. "You think you had a confab with Dedzel right arter the fight, on the battle-field, don't yer? Wal, yer *didn't*. Dedzel was in limbo. It was *me* you war talkin' tc."

The outlaw was silent for a minute or two. Then he started, and with an air of credulity exclaimed:

"By Heaven! I *thought* that voice sounded strangely. Curse you!" he hissed, ferociously. "But I still believe you lie," added the ruffian. "Here is a note I received from him last night. It is his handwriting. I would know it anywhere."

The prisoner was allowed the use of one hand till the note was produced. Some one read it to Darrell.

"When did you git that?" he asked.

"Last night; I was near your camp."

"Who gave it to you?"

"I didn't see the man's face, but I concluded it could be no other than Dedzel."

"I can explain that note," said a cheerful voice, and Adolphus Perkins appeared beside the trapper.

Thereupon he briefly related how he had procured the writing from Dedzel, and how it had been delivered.

The prisoner ground his teeth. "How could I have been so blind?"

"You may thank your lucky stars that you war so blind," said Darrell, "fur if you hadn't tuck Spider's warnin' and *put*, jist when you did, this shooter of mine would have kivered you, and thar'd been one less scoundrel in the world."

With this he ordered the men to put Buck Zigler into the wagon in which Nim Dedzel was confined, and to tie his limbs as Dedzel's were tied.

CHAPTER XII.

OF COURSE.

THAT night the emigrants formed their encampment near a patch of timber, and on a remote tributary of the Platte River. The noon halt had been so lengthened by the combat between Adolphus and the Wild Horseman, and the matter-of-course delay that followed an event so exciting, that they only traveled five miles further before sunset. Adolphus was the

hero in the camp that night, and but little else was talked about besides the fight, its cause and result. Julia did not object now to a stroll with him in the starlight!

During the evening, before any had retired for the night, a man sauntering lazily about, accosted Dusky Darrell in a careless manner:

"I say, Darrell, I suppose you're going to be the judge as to what shall be done with the prisoners?"

"I don't know," replied Darrell. "If the rest want me to, I will, though any one else would do as well, I take it."

"It is expected of you, nevertheless."

"Then I'm in fur it."

"And what will you do with the scoundrels?"

"Wal," said Darrell, musingly, "I hain't thought much about it yit, and since they killed two of our fellers, I wouldn't feel *very* bad to see 'em strung up to the nearest tree. But, hyur's as likes to see justice done everywhar, and I reckon we oughten't to do that without givin' the cusses a fair show. I opine we'd better hand them over to the people at the next fort."

"Hem! Yaas; I think they'll stretch," the man muttered, as he sauntered away.

It was past midnight. As was usual at that hour, the camp was wrapped in silence, and everybody was asleep, except the guards.

These executives up to this time had stood quietly at their posts, as though they had nothing in their minds beyond the faithful discharge of their duty. But now there was a movement among them that would have occasioned much surprise, if not suspicion, had they been watched. They all came together in one spot, and began to talk to one another in low, earnest tones, gesticulating in a very mysterious manner. In a minute they were joined by six other forms, all approaching stealthily from different points, and they were received by the first six in a manner that showed their coming had been expected.

The consultation continued for a few moments longer. Then began operations which would have looked still more suspicious to a looker-on than anything preceding them. The little band separated into equal parts, and each half left the spot as if it were a group of spirits, if one might judge from the noiselessness of their movements. Six men stole to the wagon in which the prisoners were kept. After hovering about it for awhile, some of them climbed cautiously up in front of the vehicle, and disappeared within. The others waited for them in silence, apparently keeping watch. There was some delay inside; then the men reappeared, dragging with them the two prisoners, who were still helplessly bound, and who had handkerchiefs tied securely over their mouths to insure silence.

The outlaws were now carried back to the spot where the whispered consultation had been held. In the mean time the other six men had procured two horses which they were holding there in readiness. The cords that bound the feet of the captives were speedily removed, and the captives themselves were lifted upon the backs of the horses with their hands still tied.

When this was accomplished, two men led the animals, while the rest walked beside them and

watched the riders, and in this manner the party moved away. The timber was not many rods from the encampment. They approached it with the solemn silence of a funeral *cortege*. Only a word now and then was uttered, and so softly even then, that the stillness remained unbroken.

Plainly the woods was their destination. They entered the somber shadows, and were under the dense foliage of the trees, where the darkness was intense. They moved on until they came to a small glade, on one side of which stood a tree of immense size. Here they halted. The gigantic tree in question had one large limb projecting horizontally from the trunk, at a distance of ten feet from the ground. The two horses were led forward, and made to stand side by side, directly under the horizontal limb.

A rope was produced, and a noose made in each end of it. One of these nooses was then put over Nim Dedzel's head, and drawn closely around his neck. The rope was drawn up, and passed three times around the limb above. Then the other end was brought down, and the noose fastened to Buck Zigler's neck.

All was ready now for the final act. Two men stood by, each with a whip in his hand, waiting for the moment they should use them. At a given signal they both gave the horses a sharp cut with the whips. The animals bounded forward simultaneously. There could be but one result. Both horses were riderless in an instant, and the two outlaws were dangling in mid-air!

Dusky Darrell's work as a camp detective was finished.

And now there is but little left to tell.

Under the skillful guidance of Dusky Darrell, the wagon-train was conducted through the Rocky Mountains safely, and at the first fort they arrived at, west of the range, Dusky Darrell bid the emigrants a friendly farewell and left them. All were reluctant to part with him, and especially Adolphus Perkins, but he declared it "warn't needcessary that he should go further." Before leaving he secured the services of a guide at the fort, whom he put in his place with the assurance that he could be trusted. Adolphus never saw the trapper after that day.

The emigrants reached their destination in due time, and one day, in the city of San Francisco, there was a double wedding, which not only made Adolphus and Julia happy for life, but also Rosa and Jack. Our hero was contented in the conviction that he had won his wife fairly, and never after that did his former timidity reappear.

But he did not like the country in which they had settled, and in a few months he announced his determination of returning to the East with his young wife. Jack and Rosa were more than willing to accompany them, and as Mrs. Weller would not consent to part from her children, and as Mr. Weller was already disgusted with his undertaking and new location, they all decided to go back together to their former homes. But, instead of risking another perilous and tedious journey across the plains, they took the steamer from San Francisco and bid adieu to the land of gold.

THE END.

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